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OR,
The King of Straight Flush.

A Railroad Detective Story.

BY JOHN CUTHBERT,
"THE LIGHTNING ENGINEER."

CHAPTER I.

A LEAP FROM A FLYING TRAIN.

THERE was a hum along the rails, a rush and roar, and a train of the Central Pacific railroad swept along over a wide plain, leaving behind it a trail of smoke even blacker than the night.

It was westward bound, and a hybrid mass of passengers was being borne steadily toward the Occident, each bound on his own errand, of which very few were alike.

John Loring, the conductor, was sitting idly on a trunk in the baggage-car. He had been talking with a fellow-employee, but the man had gone away and the conductor was deep in meditation.

He was a young man, being less than thirty, but he had been half his life on the rail in one capacity and another, and the Central Pacific had tried and never found him wanting.

Wild scenes he had witnessed along the Over-

THE
TRAIN
WRECKER

ONE OF BLACK BOB'S HANDS SHOT BACK AND BUCKLEY'S REVOLVER WAS KNOCKED UPWARD, HARMLESSLY DISCHARGING ITSELF AS IT FLEW.

land route, but he had a cool head and never failed to hold a winning hand.

His meditations were aroused as some one approached. He looked up, and then began to frown as he saw a stranger in the car. Before he could speak, however, the intruder nodded and said:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Loring, but I have something of importance to say to you. My name is David Braceridge, and I am a detective."

The announcement was simply made, but Loring was at once impressed. The speaker was a man of about his own age, but he was a strongly-built, keen-eyed, grave-faced man, who filled all the requirements of official dignity and force.

His very appearance commanded respect.

"I am at your service, sir," Loring courteously replied.

"Are you aware that you have a gang of train-wreckers aboard?"

"No; I did not know it."

"Such is the fact. You have heard of Black Barb Brennan and his men?"

"Every one along the Overland has. Do you mean to say Brennan is aboard?"

Loring was thoroughly interested.

"I do," Braceridge tersely replied.

"Then it follows there is a torn-up track somewhere ahead, with a gang of men waiting to plunder the train the moment that we are wrecked."

"That does not follow. If such was the case Black Barb would not be aboard; he don't risk his precious neck in any smash-up. No, the game is this: The wrecker chief has six men besides himself on the train. Others are waiting at the curve twenty miles ahead. The plan is for these men to show a danger signal and stop the train. Then the whole gang will board us, go through us, and—Brennan scores another victory!"

"You've got the matter down fine," said Loring, a little doubtfully.

"Read this."

Braceridge extended a note, and the conductor read, in substance, what has already been explained. It was an anonymous warning.

"A woman's writing," said Loring, meditatively.

"Yes."

"Who do you suppose wrote it?"

The detective smiled quietly.

"That remains to be discovered."

"Bo you know Brennan by sight?"

"Yes."

"Then, by George, we'll seize him at once!" said Loring, with energy.

"Wait!" replied Braceridge, tranquilly. "We must go slowly and carefully. It is not enough to capture Brennan; we want his followers—every one. It will be a capture of great importance, and will probably break up one of the most despicable of the Overland gangs. I have several men on the train, and each and every wrecker is marked and watched, unknown to them. Of course when you reach those ambushed by the way, you will disregard their danger signal and go flying past them, but Barb and his men must be seized before we get there. My men and I will attend to that. All the help I need from you is—send your train for all it's worth, and don't stop for anything."

"It shall be done," promptly agreed Loring. "But where is Brennan? I want a look at the notorious scoundrel."

"He is in the second car behind this, midway on the left; and is a man of immensely broad shoulders, a complexion as dark as a Spaniard's, and is now wearing a red handkerchief about his neck."

"I'll look for him."

"Beware how you do it. He is as keen as a weasel, and always watching for danger."

"One glance will be enough."

Loring went back. He had no difficulty in distinguishing Barb Brennan. There was not another man like him in the car. He was a coarse, rough fellow, ill-dressed and slovenly, and had black hair, a long mustache, which, falling below his chin, made an almost perfect half-circle, while his swarthy complexion was heightened in effect by the red handkerchief around his neck.

Slouching in a seat, his broad shoulders filled a vast space, and a timid person would as soon have asked a similar favor of an untamed tiger as to ask Barb for the other half of the seat.

His face was a strong one; his jaws were wide and stubborn, while his great, black eyes had a savage glare even in so-called repose.

He looked like a veritable barbarian.

One glance only did Loring venture to take. He then returned to Braceridge.

"Well?"

"His looks and reputation are in keeping."

"We will now see if the lion can be bound. Give your engineer the word and let the train fly. The wreckers must be gobbled at once. Be on hand to reassure the passengers. No outsiders know me here; not even Brennan."

The speed of the train was increased, and the detective prepared for work. He was perfectly cool, though he knew there was danger in what was to follow. Barb Brennan and his followers

were men who would as soon kill a human being as to rob him, and robbing and violence made up their trade.

But Braceridge had a force of brave men to back him, and he did not hesitate.

Unknown to the wreckers, each man had a detective, or officer of some sort, sitting just behind him, and they only awaited the word to cover their men. The wreckers were scattered all through the train, secure in the belief that their identity was unsuspected.

Braceridge had stationed one of his best men behind Black Barb—a cool detective named Buckley—and the leader contrived to be near that spot himself when the signal was given.

It came in the form of three sharp whistles from the engine, followed by a long-drawn note. Then seven men on the train—the seven wreckers—suddenly found revolvers pressed against their heads from the rear, while they were sternly ordered to surrender.

Braceridge was watching Brennan and Buckley, his own hand on his revolver.

If the train-wrecker chief had suspected danger he had not betrayed the fact by so much as a turn of his eyes, but, the moment the revolver touched his head, he seemed galvanized. One of Black Barb's hands shot back and Buckley's revolver was knocked upward, harmlessly discharging itself as it flew.

Another moment and Brennan was on his feet; his own revolver flashed in the light; there was a stunning report and Buckley fell back, shot through the breast.

The work had been done with wonderful rapidity.

Even Braceridge had been taken by surprise, but he was not one to need much thought. His own revolver was leveled, and Barb Brennan's life hovered in the balance, but a mistaken passenger, seeing what he thought was only a mere affray, sprung up and grasped the detective's arm.

The wrecker chief laughed hoarsely. He comprehended the mistake and saw his way clear. Twice he struck out sharply from the shoulder, and both Braceridge and the meddlesome passenger went over like ten-pins.

Another moment and Barb was bounding the length of the car, flourishing his revolver and looking so like a fiend incarnate that women shrieked and men dropped flat on the floor to avoid stray bullets.

But Barb touched none of them. He had gained a glimpse inside another car, where he saw enough to show him that a systematic combination was at work against him, and he knew that only prompt action would save him from the hands of law—and capture meant death.

He decided to take a desperate chance.

He rushed upon the platform of the car. The brakeman fled inside at his approach. The wrecker looked out into the darkness. The train was dashing rapidly over the rails. Only a black void could be seen beyond.

It seemed sure death to take the risk he had planned, but he did not hesitate. He quickly descended to the lowest step, faced toward the front, and with his nerves as good as ever leaped boldly from the train.

He had barely disappeared when Braceridge dashed open the door and stood on the platform. One glance was enough to show him how the wrecker had gone. He reached up and pulled the bell-cord with a jerk.

He intended to signal for a stop, but as the train went bounding along he remembered that the engineer had been told not to stop on any account.

The wreckers might pull the bell-cord; hence the order which was now operating against the detective, himself.

He was about to go in search of Loring when that official appeared.

"Look ahead!" he said. "The false beacon is blazing by the track, and Abe has just given her fresh power. Look, and see!"

Braceridge obeyed. They were almost at the curve; a signal-fire blazed at one side, and men were visible, who moved their arms and vainly tried to stop the train.

John Loring laughed aloud.

"It don't work this time," he said.

There was a whirr, a rush and a roar, and the flying train swept past the fire and the yelling wreckers.

The detective knew it was then too late to stop and look for Barb Brennan, dead or alive, as such a stop would give the other wreckers their desired chance. He must be content with such prey as he had secured.

They numbered six men. Taken separately, and with a revolver at their heads, none of them had dared resist; none except Brennan. He had resisted and escaped, and on the seat behind that lately occupied by him, Buckley, one of the bravest men who ever hunted Western desperadoes, lay dead, his life-blood staining the cushions a still deeper red.

Great alarm existed all along the train, but it subsided a little when the prisoners were handcuffed and put by themselves, and the dead officer tenderly laid in the baggage-car.

But David Braceridge had something else to do. As the hour grew later, and people became sleepy, he sat down in a seat beside a woman

who ever looked steadily out of the window. Her face was in shadow, and nothing could be told save that she was poorly dressed.

"Meg Brennan!" said the detective, in a low voice.

The woman started, but she neither turned nor made an answer.

"I know you," he continued, "and if you don't know me, you at least know my business. I want to say one thing. You are as safe from me as though you were my sister. Official zeal may require your arrest, but I know you better than the majority of people. You are Barb Brennan's wife, and you would follow his fortunes to the bitter end, but that's because you are a woman. In your secret heart you loathe his work."

She turned her head at last.

"He is dead!" she faltered.

"It does seem that only a miracle could have saved him, but I have a presentiment that he still lives. Mrs. Brennan, can you tell me who wrote the note of warning to me?"

She started.

"Did you get one?"

"Yes, and that, too, in a woman's writing."

"Let me see it."

"Why?"

Braceridge's suspicion that the wrecker's wife had been his correspondent was changed by her manner.

"I want to know who betrayed him!" she said, a trace of fierceness in her manner.

"That I shall not aid you to learn. Never mind. Do you leave the train at the next station?"

"Yes, to seek him. But will you really let me go?"

"No one except me knows you, and I would not war on a faithful wife—unless compelled to by events. Yes, you may go. I will leave you now."

He went, but he often glanced curiously at the still figure by the window. By reputation he knew her well. She was said to be a rich man's daughter, who had married Barb Brennan most foolishly, and had followed his fortunes ever since with dog-like fidelity, often suffering for want of food. For Barb made a poor living on the whole, and when he had money it slipped quickly through his fingers.

But through all Meg Brennan followed him. There was blood on his hands and she was said to be honest and even kind-hearted, but in peril, privation and suffering she had clung to the unworthy and brutal being unkind fate had made her husband.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNTED TRAIN-WRECKER.

The finest house in Belplain was that of Judge Westcourt; the richest man in the town was Judge Westcourt. He had won his official title in the East, but he had saved but little money there. When he came West his luck turned, and, at the time of our story, he was reputed worth a quarter of a million. The exact sum is of no importance.

His residence was just outside the village, and on a broad tract of land over which roamed a great herd of cattle. Against his will, Belplain had made him a judge, once more, and he was known as a stern magistrate.

One evening, his daughter, Miriam, was parting from a gentleman at the door, and their manner was decidedly lover-like.

"Two days more!" said Dane Templeton, in a low voice.

"Before you come again?" questioned the girl, archly.

"You know what I mean. Forty-eight hours hence I shall be able to call you my wife—my own Miriam!"

Her head drooped. Tall and stately, she had much of her father's pride and reserve, but she possessed a true woman's heart and all her affection had been given to handsome Dane Templeton. She would have scouted the idea that he was unworthy of it.

When they had said good-night Templeton strode down the road toward the village, whistling a light air. He paused to laugh, and then muttered to himself:

"My boy, you are the luckiest dog west of the wide Mississip. Two days more, and then you will marry a beauty and an heiress. Aha! I long to get at old Westcourt's money-bags. Won't I make the coin jingle! And I am—am I, or am I not?—the same ill-conditioned dog who once roamed like a hunted wolf with others of the pack. Sounds! what a rise is this, my countrymen!"

He stopped suddenly as a burly figure rose from the wayside and stood in his path, and his hand fell on a revolver.

"Keep back!" he said, sharply. "I never give anything to tramps, and if you try violence I'll shoot you as I would a dog. Do you hear?"

The man laughed hoarsely.

"Yes, I hear," he replied, "and you make me laugh. Don't you know me, Cain Magruder?"

Templeton recoiled.

"Great heavens!" he ejaculated, in consternation, "it is Barb Brennan!"

"Right you are, old man; it's what remains o' Barb Brennan, though it's only a remnant."

"Are you wounded, or sick?" demanded Templeton, with an eagerness which betrayed the fact that he hoped for an affirmative reply.

"Neither. I'm all right, only I've had a collision with an Express train an' got rather the worst on't. In plain words, I jumped from a train running thirty miles an hour, an' though I escaped without broken bones, I'm a good bit shook up an' sore from toe to scalp."

"Still at your old tricks," said Dane, frowning.

"Just so; I never desert my colors. But the band is all broke up. I went onther Centraler play ther old false-signal game, takin' six o' my best men with me. Ther cussed detectives got wind on't, an' all the boyees was gobbled but me. I escaped by jumpin' from ther train, an' I tell you it was a miracle I wa'n't killed."

"The devil protects his own," said Dane scowling.

"Hope he'll keep it up, fur I need protection. Ther officers are arter me; they've run me fast an' far; an' I am like a hunted buck—hard pressed an' nigh winded. I can skeerely travel, I'm so lame."

"What will you do now?"

"You must hide me."

"I?"

"Yes."

"I won't do it!" declared Templeton.

"Then," said Brennan, hoarsely but firmly, "I'll go to Jedge Westcourt an' tell him that Dane Templeton, who is to marry his only daughter, is not a rich and honest man—but, really, is named Cain Magruder, an' is an ex-lieutenant of Black Barb Brennan's train-wreckers. Put that in your pipe an' smoke at it!"

Templeton recoiled. At one glance he saw the pit which yawned before him, and he knew Brennan too well to plead for mercy.

"I have a hundred dollars," he said hastily. "I'll give you every cent—"

"It ain't money I want—that won't save me. What I want is ter be hid. The detective devils are arter me, an' as I killed one on 'em on the train, I'll stretch hemp ef they get me. You must hide me!"

"But I know of no place. I am boarding at the village hotel, and—"

"You must *find* a place," said the wrecker, fiercely. "I tell you my life is hov'rin' in ther balance—an', by ther fiends, ef I sink, Cain Magruder sinks too. You hear me?"

Hear him? Every word was burning in Cain Magruder's brain. He could not defy this man, who stood before him like an athlete from perdition. One word from Barb would not only ruin his hopes of marrying an heiress, but would send him to prison for a score of years—perhaps to the gallows. Had it been any other man he would have tried to shoot him, but he knew the wrecker chief of old.

In those broad shoulders and ponderous arms lurked great strength, and no one was quicker with revolver and knife.

Cain was in despair.

"Great heavens! where can I hide you?" he cried.

"I will tell you!"

It was a new voice, and both men wheeled abruptly, alike alarmed, but the first glance showed them a woman, who seemed peaceable enough, while a second look caused them to speak together.

"Meg!"

"Meg Brennan!"

"Yes, it is I," said the wrecker's wife, quickly. Barb grasped her arm savagely.

"Have you come to betray me?" he demanded fiercely. "Have you come to lead those devils ag'in' me?—have you, I say? Ef you hev, I'll—"

He had raised a large knife above her bosom, but she managed to speak.

"No, no!" she gasped. "Believe me, Barber, I have not. I am still—"

"Then why are you here?"

"Where should I be but where my husband is?" asked the long-suffering woman.

"Anywhere else when he's close-hunted. Ef that cursed Braceridge sees ye, he'll know I'm nigh."

"He shall not see me," Meg replied. "I am here to save you and I can do it. The refuge you desire is not far away; I can take you to a place no other living person knows of now."

"How can you, if you're a stranger here?" suspiciously asked Cain Magruder.

Brennan laughed coarsely.

"She ain't so much o' a stranger ez she might be. You'd skeerely think she an' his royal nibs, old Jedge Westcourt, was brother an' sister, but sech is ther fact. Ha! ha! Barb Brennan didn't marry no scum. Speak, woman; what hidin'-place do you know of?"

"In the judge's old house there is a room of which even he knows nothing. It was built by the former owner as a refuge for a friend who was under the ban of the law, and who was concealed there a long time. I found the room by chance; no one else knows of it; and as the old wing is not now occupied, it is the safest hidin'-place we can have. I say we, for it is best we

should both go there. Mr. Magruder can bring up the food we need."

She spoke rapidly, feverishly, and her manner was that of one utterly wearied out, but her words and her reasoning were clear.

Magruder was startled. The idea of having the pair in Westcourt's very house was as startling as the assertion of Meg's relationship to the judge was strange; but she met his opposition with arguments he could not overthrow, and he dared not anger Barb.

What better place of security than Judge Westcourt's house? Who would think them mad enough to go there, to such a stern enforcer of law? And few people indeed knew who Meg had been in her happier days.

Brennan himself saw the wisdom of her argument, and promptly consented, so Cain had to yield.

He also promised to supply them with food.

"An' see to it you don't betray us," said Barb, darkly. "It's easy enough to see who you once was, an' we sink or swim together, Cain Magruder."

"Have no fear: I'll do my best," said the younger man, with pretended earnestness, though he would gladly have killed them both.

Somehow, he felt that with their coming his hopes of marrying Miriam Westcourt were dashed to ruin. So far Meg did not suspect his little game; he sincerely hoped she would not, but he dared not ask that favor. He forgot to caution Barb, nor would that vicious and wayward individual have heeded his request.

The trio turned their steps toward Westcourt's house. The portion occupied by the family had been built but ten years. An older portion was still standing, and the judge intended to repair and use it some time, but for years it had seldom echoed to human voice.

Magruder shivered as they neared it. What if he was seen in his present company? It would ruin him.

But they were not observed, and Meg soon proved that she had not spoken aimlessly. In less than half an hour she and the hunted train-wrecker were concealed in the secret room, and Cain was on his way back to the village.

"Curse them! Curse them!" he repeated, again and again, grinding his teeth as he spoke. "I would give my note for ten thousand dollars to know they were dead, but I can't worst Barb Brennan and I dare not betray him to the law. It would drag me down, too. Curse him!"

CHAPTER III.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

THE following day Judge Westcourt had just finished a case at the village when he was approached by a keen-looking stranger who came to business at once.

"My name, sir, is Braceridge, and I am a detective. I request your aid, judge, to hunt down a notorious criminal, supposed to be near here."

"Whatever I can do shall be done, sir," promptly replied Westcourt. "Who is the criminal?"

"Black Barb Brennan, the Train-Wrecker."

The name revealed nothing to Westcourt. He had not seen his sister for years; he did not even know whether she was living; and though he was sternly positive her husband was a scoundrel, he did not know him as Barb Brennan.

"Is that ruffian in this vicinity?" demanded the judge.

"Yes."

"Then, by the Eternal, we'll hunt him down like a wolf!"

Westcourt spoke with the same fierceness which had often frightened the wits out of timid people in court. He was a stern old man with an inexorable will. Although aristocratic of appearance, he was as aggressive in his way as a prize-fighter. His manner was alternately harsh and frigid; he could demolish the timid with the one mood and freeze them with the other. Even the fashion of his hair was aggressive. He seemed a born fighter, and as a judge was a terror to any person accused of crime, whether that person was guilty or not.

"We have pursued him to Belplain," added Braceridge, "but here he has disappeared. We are sure he has not gone on; consequently, he is concealed somewhere."

"We will find him," asserted the judge.

"If we can."

"If we can? Do you, a detective, admit the possibility of failure?"

"When pursuing Barb Brennan, I do," said Braceridge, calmly. "If ever man had nine lives, 'tis he. Only four days ago he leaped from a train running thirty miles an hour to avoid us. He took the one chance in a hundred and escaped serious injury. If you have studied his career you must be aware that was only one case out of many. He is lucky, bold and cunning. Let us not underrate him."

Westcourt was by no means ready to take this view of the case. He believed failure a proof of incompetency, and would not admit that incompetency existed in Belplain.

Braceridge had five men with him. To these were added the local force, and the search for Black Barb began. It was continued all day, but the wrecker was not found.

By night two things had happened. The judge was a weary man, and he had taken a fancy to Braceridge. As a consequence, he resolved to pass the night easily, and he invited the detective to stay with him until morning, an invitation which was not declined, though David did not suspect what an unusual honor was being done him.

He went to the house and was introduced to Miriam, whom he found to be a very charming girl, but he was an officer in the fullest sense of the word and did not attempt to make himself more agreeable than a transient caller should.

He did, however, look at the old, rambling wing of the house with suspicion, and though Westcourt declared no outsider could enter it, they went through the empty rooms together. There was no visible sign of Barb Brennan.

The detective retired at an early hour, and he was so weary he soon fell asleep and left all thoughts of the train-wreckers behind him.

After some hours he awoke with an uneasy feeling, and at once turned in bed, thus facing the middle of the room. While he had slept the moon had arisen, and two long bands of silvery light marked the carpet.

Without stirring further he lay looking absently at them, busily thinking, and thus several minutes passed. Suddenly, he noticed something peculiar. Where the light had been but a minute before, he saw a dark, round shadow, which looked like a reflection in blackness of the moon.

Why had it not been there before, and why was it there then?

He mentally asked the question, but did not move. He watched the shadow. It stirred, advanced and lengthened, and he was sure he heard a slight rustling sound. By this time his every sense was on the alert. In his profession as a hunter of criminals, he was often hunted by that class, and it flashed upon him that some desperado had entered his chamber to assassinate him.

Quietly he slipped his hand under the pillow, drew out a revolver and waited.

The shadow had become stationary once more, but its shape was now well defined. He could almost have sworn it was that cast by a human head.

Expecting to see the head itself rise above the bed, he waited, but not a sound broke the silence. The detective waited patiently; he believed he was with a crafty foe, and resolved to beat him at his own game.

Suddenly the shadow moved. It shot forward away from the window, and a loud rustling was followed by the appearance of the substance which caused it.

But Braceridge lay too much astonished to move.

Not only was the course of the intruder away from him, and toward the door, but *it was a woman*.

He had barely time to realize this when she crossed the second belt of moonlight, and a fresh and even more startling discovery was made.

He recognized Meg Brennan, the wrecker's wife!

The detective leaped to the floor, but he stood alone in the room. The door had opened and closed like a flash, and the late intruder was gone. He opened the door himself, but the hall outside was dark and silent.

Braceridge was a practical man, but he rubbed his eyes and wondered for a moment if he had been dreaming. Meg Brennan there, and freely roaming about? Impossible! And yet—yet—he was sure he had recognized her.

With quick movements he partially dressed and went into the hall, bearing a lamp and his revolver. The hall was vacant. Three doors opened from it, besides his own. One led to the judge's room, one to Miss Westcourt's, and the third to a vacant chamber. That it was vacant Braceridge soon proved.

At the southern end of the hall was a window. He looked out and saw a sheer descent of at least twenty-five feet. The intruder had not gone that way.

Resolved to leave no stone unturned, the detective aroused Westcourt, told him what had happened, and together they searched the house. They found no trace of Meg Brennan, nor of any other interloper.

"You dreamed it all," said the judge, practically.

"Impossible! I am no child to confound the real and imaginary," Braceridge replied.

"Then, where did your visitor go?"

"Outside."

"Allow me to ask how she entered. You have seen my precautions against thieves. Do you suppose you could break in? Could any one do so? Are not my bolts and bars burglar proof?"

"Admit that they seem so. I have no theory to advance as to how she entered; I only know she was here—Meg Brennan, the wrecker's wife. I would know her face among a thousand. I'll swear that I saw her!"

Westcourt was not convinced, and, indeed, he seemed to have the reasonable side of the argument, but Braceridge was equally firm in his conviction. True, his view of the woman had been but momentary, but it had been enough to satisfy him.

He returned to his room, but not to sleep. Meg Brennan was near, which was good proof that Black Barb was near, also. He felt sure that the wrecker, seeing that his case was hopeless with such determined pursuers behind him, had tried to turn the tables by forever getting rid of his chief enemy. That the plan had failed seemed due to Braceridge's lucky awakening, but the desperadoes might move again; so he dressed himself fully and sat down to watch through the rest of the night.

It was time wasted; the hours crept past, but no further disturbance occurred.

Another day dawned, and Braceridge learned that it was to be an eventful one at the judge's house. That evening was the time appointed for the marriage of Miriam Westcourt and Dane Templeton, and, of course, the affair would not be slighted even for the chase of Barb Brennan.

All this the judge explained after breakfast. He said that the local force of Belpain was at Braceridge's disposal, and he hoped the train-wrecker would be hunted down, but, for once, he must neglect official work and attend to private affairs.

He had but one daughter, and he expected to see her married but once.

Braceridge was just starting out when the self-styled Dane Templeton arrived. The latter was a miserable man. He remembered the detective very well in the old days when he was Cain Magruder, and though he did not think David knew him, it was running a great risk to meet him.

This was not Dane's only trouble. He had not been able to keep his promise and supply the Brennans with food. Once during the night he had tremblingly approached the house, but he had chosen an unlucky time. Just then lights began to flash in the building, and the ex-wrecker turned and fled.

He dared not approach again, and he was on nettles. By that time the Brennans must be getting hungry, and as Barb was capable of any act of bravado when the mood seized him, his confederate knew not then how soon the suspended sword might fall.

His meeting with Braceridge proved a relief. The latter did not think of looking suspiciously at a man selected as Miriam Westcourt's husband; he greeted him with politeness and then turned to his men.

The man-hunt was recommenced. Braceridge was firm in the belief that he had seen Meg Brennan by his bed, and he argued that the fugitives were hiding in the rank prairie-grass, or in some hole not far away.

That they had escaped the line of officials drawn around Belpain he did not believe.

So the detectives and their aid went about their work, and Dane Templeton entered the house to make love to Miriam, listening each dreary moment for expected evidence that Barb Brennan was discovered; and that meant ruin to him.

CHAPTER IV.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

THE result of the day's search proved that Braceridge had not over-estimated the difficulty of finding Barb Brennan. The party under his lead had searched carefully, but without making any discovery whatever. The local officers had adopted the opinion that the train-wrecker was not near Belpain, but the detective was firm in his former belief.

He had tracked Barb to the town, and he had the place so surrounded that he felt sure the quarry had not escaped, but was hiding. Where he was Braceridge did not pretend to know, but he was resolved to learn if such a thing was possible.

At the end of the search he was weary enough to take another night's rest, but when Westcourt invited him to be present at the wedding he accepted the invitation.

The affair was to be a grand one for Belpain. The judge would have thrown in all of the Murray Hill accompaniments had it been possible, but as the prairie town was not New York he had to be content with such items of magnificence as lay at his hand. All of the well-to-do people were invited, and Belpain was in a wild fever of expectation.

Guests began to arrive at an early hour, and were received with a dignity the judge had never before shown in Belpain, whose people were plain folk, but was not this the great event of his later life?

Braceridge found himself little observed, whereat he was greatly pleased, so he sat apart as much as was possible and observed the others. It must be confessed that he looked at Miriam Westcourt more than at any one else. Such a thing was natural, of course, since she was to be the bride of the occasion, but why should he feel an actual regret that she was to marry Dane Templeton?

He assured himself it was because Templeton bore no evidence of being an over-estimable man. The detective did not like his face. It was a selfish one, he believed, and it had other peculiarities. The mouth seemed weak, though the eyes were bold and resolute enough, and he was persuaded that Mr. Templeton was no angel.

Such was Miriam's opinion. She had made her choice, and she believed she had chosen wisely.

Templeton paid no attention to Braceridge; he dared not trust himself to speak with him, lest something should turn the detective's mind back to the days when there was a Cain Magruder, and he was not Dane Templeton. True, there seemed little danger of that, but the groom-elect was on nettles.

He had reason to be, for, not only did he fear David Braceridge, but he had been unable to carry food to Barb Brennan and his wife, and as he knew they needed it, every minute was liable to bring about some calamity.

What if the fierce and fearless wretches should venture out for food and be seen and captured?

On the whole, Templeton was in an unusual feverish state, even for a man about to be married.

The hour for the wedding at last arrived and a ripple of excitement ran among the guests. Judge Westcourt stood erect and looked like an old Roman, but on his strong face was a gleam of fatherly pride and pleasure as he looked at the bride. Miriam's face was a little flushed, but she was calmer than the groom. His nervousness was apparent to all, but as they did not know that he had ever figured as Cain Magruder, they only looked at each other and smiled.

The couple took their places, and the ceremony began. The minister was an old man; old enough to know the gravity of the occasion; and his voice somehow reminded Braceridge of the solemnity of a music in a vast church.

But all these impressions suddenly vanished.

A new voice—a distinct, agitated female voice—broke in on the old minister's moderate utterances:

"Stop!—in the name of Heaven, stop! This ceremony must not go on. I forbid it!"

Many eyes were turned in mute wonder toward the speaker. What one of their number, if one of them it was, dared interfere thus? Westcourt's face darkened with anger, but he turned with the rest. And this is what they saw:

A tall woman, over whose shoulders floated long, dark hair; whose face was very pale; whose eyes glittered with a strange light; whose garments were rude, ill-fitting, coarse and ragged; and whose whole appearance was one fit only for a tramp.

So thought the ordinary guests, and, though they saw traces of actual beauty on the worn face, they were filled with indignation that such a miserable wretch dared interfere.

Two persons recognized her, however, and Dane Templeton dropped Miriam's hand and recoiled, white and trembling, while David Braceridge stood amazed.

The new-comer was Meg Brennan!

Judge Westcourt saw nothing familiar in her face, and he strode two steps toward her with a brow metaphorically black with anger.

"Miserable woman!" he exclaimed, "how dare you interfere here? What mad-house has let you loose? Get out of this house, or I call an officer and have you arrested!"

The woman smiled bitterly.

"It would be like you, Brinsley Westcourt; you were never celebrated for tenderness to your own flesh and blood. No; you need not raise your hand—I am here to be heard. Sir, has time so changed my face that you do not know her who was once your sister?"

She flung the hair further back from her face, and David Braceridge, who had moved forward to cut off her retreat, was struck by the resemblance between her and Miriam. Allowing for the difference in age, and the terrible life Meg Brennan had led, she was very like the judge's daughter.

Westcourt recoiled. His nerves were strong, but had they been of veritable iron they could not have defied emotion then.

"Margaret!" he gasped.

"Ay, Margaret Westcourt—your sister."

Except for the glitter in her eyes the woman was calm, and as she stood there with her really fine figure drawn well up, the astonished guests hardly dared to breathe. The judge was not one of their kind; he was richer, nobler, grander and prouder than they; and it was amazing that there should be a skeleton in that grand closet.

Cain Magruder longed to flee, but dared not. The new turn of affairs had given him a weak, treacherous hope that Meg was about to waste her anger on her brother, and not unmask the happy man (?) of the occasion. Yet, he dared not speak or stir.

Judge Westcourt's emotion quickly changed. It was a shock to see his sister, whom he had cursed and driven away years before, but she no longer had any place in his cold heart, and surprise quickly gave place to fierce anger that she should have the audacity to come to his house, especially at such a time.

"Miserable woman!" he again cried, "how dare you show your face here? Go—go before I call the servants and have you thrown out!"

Again that wild laugh, which showed that she was in a nearly insane state of mind.

"So you do not wish to recognize your sister before all these grand people? Well, be it so;

there is no love wasted between us. No, nor any pride in relationship. Wait, Brinsley Westcourt, or you will be sorry for your impetuosity. Do you suppose I have come here to claim connection with you? No; a thousand times, no! I scorn you and your relationship, and I would not do you a favor to save you from the most abject misery. But there is one here who does move my pity."

She looked at Miriam, and Dane Templeton grew weak about the knees. No one saw that Braceridge had moved silently to within a few paces of the wild woman.

"There is no one here who wants your pity—" began the judge hotly, but an imperious wave of her hand stopped him.

"In your daughter, proud man, I see what I was before worse than the hand of death fell upon me. Miriam, unless her looks belie her, is a worthy girl, and I will save her. Brinsley Westcourt, you cursed me years ago and drove me out because I dared to love a man you did not like, and you boasted that your judgment was infallible. You have chosen a husband for your daughter, and proved just how good your judgment is—"

Dane Templeton started forward.

"Sir," he cried excitedly, "Judge Westcourt, are we to be longer cursed by such a scene as this? Will you send this woman away, or—"

"I will send her away!" declared the judge. "Here!—James, Rufus!—this way. Take this creature out of sight!"

"Back!" cried Meg Brennan, with a vehemence which made the two stout servants recoil. "I will not leave until I have had my say. Little there is I wish to speak here, and I would speak nothing only for that pale-faced girl."

"She wants no help from such as you!" hissed Dane, almost tempted to draw his revolver.

Meg laughed shortly, harshly.

"Neither do you, I suppose, my jail-bird. Well, you would not have seen me here had you kept your promise—you know what I mean. Hunger drove me out, and thus I learned what was going on about me."

"Judge, will you order her out?" demanded Templeton, cold perspiration standing on his face.

"Yes; by all the fiends, I will. James—Rufus!"

"Wait! Give me one moment. I like the scene no better than you, but I must, I will tell you what sort of a man you have chosen for a son-in-law. Know you that he who calls himself Dane Templeton is, really—"

The maddened man would have sprung forward, for he saw that all was lost, but a hand fell forcibly on his arm and kept him back.

"Dane Templeton is an impostor, a swindler, a gambler, an outlaw!" cried Meg Brennan. "His true name is Cain Magruder, and he was once a member of Black Barb Brennan's wrecker band!"

The revelation fell on no one with more actual surprise than on the detective; but while the others doubted, he was wholly convinced. Who should speak with more positiveness than Black Barb's wife?

Cain Magruder, white, trembling and furious, snatched a revolver from his pocket and leveled it at Meg, but with one motion Braceridge disarmed him, and with a second flung him several feet away, where he fell in a heap on the floor.

Then the alert detective turned upon the wrecker's wife, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Meg Brennan, you are my prisoner!" he coolly said.

CHAPTER V.

"WHERE IS BARB BRENNAN?"

SMALL events sometimes change the course of human lives. We have seen Cain Magruder try to get food to the Brennans, as he had agreed to do, and fail; we have seen him harboring fears that his failure might have unpleasant results. Just what he had dreaded had come to pass.

In their secret room the wrecker and his wife had waited for food, and waited in vain, until—though Meg would have held out longer—Barb declared that he would bear hunger no longer. She soothed him as long as was possible, meeting his fierce, angry, grizzly-like moods with such arguments as she could, but the time came when he was no longer to be held in check.

Even then, however, it was she who supplied the practical common sense of the pair. She argued that, with her knowledge of the house, she had a better chance of securing food undetected than he, and she made the attempt and succeeded.

But she made a discovery while doing so. She heard two female servants speak of Miriam and her approaching marriage, and they also mentioned that the young couple were then in the parlor.

What was it that made Meg Brennan wish to see the man who was to be Miss Westcourt's husband? She was estranged from the family and exiled from honest society; what interest should she have in a girl almost unknown to her? Better for her if she had felt none, but, in brief, she managed to get a view of the lovers.

Then she discovered that the chosen man was Cain Magruder.

Once more in the secret room she fought a terrible battle with herself. We use the expression advisedly. Miriam's face had appealed strongly to her sympathies and she wished to save her. But what would be the cost? Would it not result in the capture of her own husband? —the miserable criminal she loved so well, yet so mistakenly.

Unsuspecting of what was in her mind, Brennan ate and cursed, but she thought and planned until her head was almost turned. We need not follow her meditations; we have seen the result. She had resolved to save Miriam at all costs, but she was in a nervous state, when she entered the room, which was not strictly sanity.

But she had not dreamed of the horror which came to her when, feeling that grasp on her arm, she turned and saw Braceridge. She recognized him at once, and her hands fell by her side.

"All is lost!" she gasped.

"Heaven forgive me for what I do to you," said the detective, really moved, "but my duty is plain. Where is Barb Brennan?"

The question aroused within her much the same instinct which causes an animal to defend its young with a disregard to self-danger. The drooping head was raised and she looked at him defiantly.

"I do not know," she replied, quickly.

Just then Westcourt stepped forward.

"By what name did I hear you call this woman, sir?"

"She is the wife of Barb Brennan, the Overland train-wrecker," he finally replied.

"Just Heaven! has it come to this?" and the proud man looked at his sister as though she had been a leper.

"What is it to you?" she defiantly asked.

"Nothing; thank Providence, nothing! But, whose judgment was right in regard to the wretch I warned you against, years ago? I clearly see by the description given of Brennan that he and Wardsworth are one. Just what I prophesied!"

His voice and manner were exultant, and she looked at him as though she could have struck him down at her feet.

"Do you wish to test the truth of her statement in regard to Dane Templeton?" asked the detective, coldly.

"No, sir; a charge from such a quarter amounts to nothing," and Westcourt glanced at Dane, who was reclining, half-conscious, on the knee of a guest, as though he was about to add a reprimand for the force Braceridge had used in prostrating the fellow.

"Pardon me, but I believe it amounts to a good deal. Would Mrs. Brennan have put herself into my power to make a groundless charge? Hardly, I think."

"I swear that it is true," said Meg. "Do with me as you will, but save Miriam. I declare that yonder man, who calls himself Dane Templeton, is an ex-member of the wrecker band, and that his real name is Cain Magruder. You, Mr. Braceridge, can easily prove what I say."

"At Judge Westcourt's bidding, I will look for the proof. That there was a Cain Magruder, I well remember, and I believe what you say. At any rate, I should counsel a postponement of the wedding."

The judge was a stubborn man, but he really cared for Miriam, and the idea of marrying her to a criminal, and thereby disgracing the family name, was something horrible for him to contemplate. He made no remonstrance to the proposed delay.

Braceridge, however, thought less of that than another matter. All his professional zeal had been aroused by the unexpected appearance of Meg Brennan. He had reason to believe she and her husband were together, and he now thought he had Barb almost in his clutches. He remembered the midnight appearance in his room, and was sure the woman had been near Westcourt's all the while.

He thought of the disused part of the house and decided that the train-wrecker must be concealed there. True, the place had been searched but Barb was noted for his ingenuity.

Accompanied by one of his associate detectives, he led the woman aside. Knowing the futility of opposing her strength to his, she remained passive in his hands, but her lips were closed with an expression which did not promise well for a confession.

"Mrs. Brennan," said the detective, almost gently, "where is your husband?"

"Beyond your reach, thank Heaven!"

"I asked where."

"I do not know. He may be in Dakota now, or in Utah."

"He is not a mile away."

She attempted to look surprised.

"He left here two days ago, traveling rapidly."

"I cannot censure your attempt to shield him, but you and I know you are not speaking truthfully. You and he have been hiding together, and it is not hard to surmise where. Will you lead the way to the old wing, and point out his hiding-place?"

Not a muscle of her pale face showed dismay.

"I will willingly lead you over the old wing, but, thank Heaven, Barb is not there. He is

beyond your reach; he has escaped, and the bloodhounds of law may howl for him in vain, I expect them to howl; I know their way. I have been tracked by them as though I were a wild beast for years. Well, so be it—it is manly to hunt women, I suppose!"

Her voice had grown hard and bitter, but the detective did not feel the least trace of resentment. He pitied the woman most sincerely, for he believed that her heart was good, and it was her misfortune, not her fault, that she loved a man so base as Brennan.

"Have I ever shown harshness to you, Mrs. Brennan?" he mildly asked. "Did I not preserve the secret of your identity on the train? Was it the first time that I shielded you? Believe me, it is far from my purpose to persecute a woman. At present, it is my duty to deliver you to the authorities. I shall do nothing of the kind. As soon as Barb is found, you are free."

"So you are trying to bribe me to betray him?" was the fierce retort.

"Pardon me; I am not. I meant nothing of the kind. I have asked you to tell where he is, but I make no conditions. No. Whatever comes to him, I say you are free, so far as I am concerned, from danger, and I will try to save you from arrest. God forbid that I should trifle with a wife's loyalty to her husband, even in the interest of justice."

His manner was so unmistakably kind that tears rushed to her eyes. What he said was true. More than once, when other men would have arrested her, he had allowed her to go free. Now, this kindness touched her, though she felt that she ought to hate him for Barb's sake.

"I have wronged you," she said, humbly, "but—but, I tell you Barber has escaped."

"Time will prove," he gravely replied, as he gave her in charge of his subordinate and returned to the room where there had so nearly been a wedding.

He arrived at a critical juncture.

Westcourt had dismissed the guests, and he was having an awkward interview with Miriam and Magruder, in which the latter protested his innocence and the girl took his part with all the unreasoning loyalty of her sex; but where the judge was holding stubbornly to his opinion, despite all Dane's fine airs, that there must be an investigation to determine whether the younger man was saint or sinner.

Braceridge would have retreated, but Dane saw him and strode angrily toward him.

"Curse you, I owe all this to you!" he furiously exclaimed.

"You owe nothing, good or ill, to me," was the calm reply.

"I say this is a plot in which you have had a hand."

"You are mistaken."

"It is false, and when you deny your guilt you are a li—"

"Stop!"

The detective's voice was raised but little above its usual key, but there was that in it which did stop the angry man, and he hesitated to continue his abuse.

"At present I am hunting only Barb Brennan," added Braceridge, coldly, "but, if I remember aright, there was once a reward offered for Cain Magruder. Let me ask you to indulge in no personal abuse of a man who was as much surprised as any one by Mrs. Brennan's charge."

"These are fine words!" said Miriam, scornfully.

"They possess the merit of truth, Miss Westcourt," was the unmoved reply.

"I believe your intentions are of the best nature, Braceridge," interrupted the judge, "and I will have no more questioning of them. I, at least, know what the duties of an officer are, and you seem to be all that is necessary. But, about—about that woman. Have you sent her away?"

"Not yet, sir. I wish to consult you privately."

"I will accompany you."

Westcourt made one step, and then turned and looked at Miriam and Templeton.

"I understand," said the latter, bitterly. "We are not to be left together. So be it; I will take myself out of sight, for the time, but I shall write to my family lawyers and prove that better blood than mine does not exist."

Mr. Magruder was not only willing, but anxious, to go. He feared that he would be arrested if he delayed. It was to try and offset that possibility that he talked so pompously; his hopes of winning Miriam seemed dashed to pieces and his plans for the future were all in chaos. He had a vague notion that, as soon as he was free from Braceridge's terribly penetrating gaze, he would take the cars direct for Boston or San Francisco—the remoter the point, the safer for him.

But his mode of exit was not so bad. He spoke as consolingly as he could to Miriam, threw into the dish a little more spice in the shape of Claude Melnotte-like pictures of his genealogical tree, scowled at the detective and went out like a banished hero.

Miriam looked at Braceridge with bitter resentment, but nothing seemed capable of moving

his wonderful composure, which was not so much of an icy, as of an iron, nature.

The judge necessarily had something to say to his daughter, so Braceridge delicately retired to another room. There the judge soon joined him.

"I am now ready for business," the elder man tersely said.

"And business is ready for us. What hiding-place is there in the old wing which we have overlooked?"

"None."

"Yet, Barb Brennan is concealed there."

Westcourt looked surprised.

"Why do you think so?"

"Rest assured, Brennan's wife would not be here unless her husband was near."

Other arguments the detective advanced, but Westcourt did not hear them. The first had been enough. He remembered the relationship between his disowned sister and himself, and, with his knowledge of her nature, felt satisfied that even to escape death she would not have concealed herself in his house unless her husband had been near.

A cruel smile curled his thin lips at the idea of dragging out for punishment the man he had hated in the past, and for whom Margaret Westcourt had deserted and disgraced her family beyond forgiveness—in his opinion.

"If the wretch is in the old wing we will tear it down, a board at a time, but we will have him out!" he declared.

Braceridge's brows contracted. As an officer he was zealous in the discharge of his duty, but neither as an officer nor as a man had he the remorseless hatred the judge showed. But he did not reveal his feeling.

The guests were gone, but half a dozen stout men employed on the ranch were still in the kitchen. These men were armed with axes, crowbars and the like, and, led by the judge, the party went to the old wing.

Where should they begin?

Westcourt was in favor of tearing up the floor in a general way, probing the walls, and creating destruction in general; but the detective held to a plan he had formed. If there was a secret room, and he believed such might be Black Barb's retreat, a little mathematical calculation would reveal its location.

CHAPTER VI.

A CORNERED DESPERADO.

BRACERIDGE had supplied himself with the implements necessary to test his idea, and he began a systematic measuring to see if a secret room existed. When the ranchmen understood his object they smiled and winked at each other, but the detective kept serenely on with his work.

He had precedents for his idea, and the arrangement of the visible rooms of the old building was so eccentric that he believed his theory possible and probable.

Finally he stopped and stood erect.

"There is a space ten feet square just beyond us which is not accounted for as yet," he said. "Is there a chimney there?"

"No; you saw it at the further end of the house."

"If there is not a second one, there is something else. Men, tear a hole through that wall!"

The work was begun with some zeal, for the men had lost their taste for winking, and plastering and wood came crashing from their places and went rattling to the floor. While they worked the judge held the light and Braceridge held his revolvers.

Beyond the wall was a narrow space, and then another set of lathing, and when the ax had broken this in the detective called off the men.

"If Brennan is there and armed, there is danger for those on whom he first gets his eyes. I will do the rest of the work. It is my game and you need not run the risk."

He calmly took an ax, but the ranchmen came to the front at once and declined to be mere spectators. They declared that they gloried in danger, and as they were there to use the axes and crowbars, they would, with Mr. Braceridge's permission, attend to their branch of the service themselves.

Their sturdy bravery pleased Braceridge, and when he had vainly explained what a desperate fellow Brennan was—which was no news to them—the work went on as before.

A considerable opening was soon made, revealing a vacancy of some sort beyond, but from that quarter there was no sound whatever, giving Westcourt the opinion that the place was untenanted. Not so the detective. He believed Black Barb was there, crouched like an animal in his den, and waiting to do desperate work when the right time occurred. The fact that there had so far been no stir inclined him to believe the wrecker had no revolvers, which was a point greatly in their favor, if true.

The opening grew larger, until it was sizable enough to admit a man, and then David motioned to the men to stop work.

"Barb Brennan," he calmly said, "we know where you are, and we are going to have you. Will you come out peaceably and surrender, or shall I come after you?"

It was a distinct question, but deathlike silence reigned in the secret room.

"Just as you say," coolly continued Braceridge; "I will visit you in your quarters. Hold the light, judge, and I will go in!"

"Wait a moment. I have a paper in my pocket; let us ignite that and throw it in. This will enable us to see who is there," said Westcourt.

"And, possibly, set your house on fire."

"I'll risk that."

So saying, the judge arranged the paper in a way to suit himself, set one end on fire and tossed it through the opening. Its passage against the air deadened the blaze for a moment, and as it touched the floor nothing could be seen, but this was barely done before a long arm appeared beside it, it was snatched up, and then a huge figure bounded through the gap.

It was Barb Brennan!

He came like a tornado, his face distorted with rage, and they soon saw why he had taken the flaming paper. He held it well out and tried to thrust it in the face of the first man he met, but that man was the detective, who had been in danger too often to have his face scorched by any such trick as that.

As the fiery weapon was thrust forward he stooped quickly, evading it, and in a moment more he had grasped the train-wrecker by the waist. The blazing paper fell, and Westcourt trampled it under foot.

Braceridge was a strong man, but he soon found that he had met one by far his superior. Barb stooped and caught him in return, and despite his tenacious hold, swept him easily aside and tried to rush away. But the cowboys were there, and ripe for a bout with the notorious outlaw, and they piled upon him in a heap, getting a hold where they could.

For a while there was a fight the like of which the judge had never before seen. It was like several small dogs on a big one, if the comparison is not disrespectful, and Brennan made a tremendous fight. Back and forth surged the combatants, fighting furiously, and Westcourt, who was a referee without a controlling voice, had seldom been so excited.

How would it end?

Braceridge's revolver would have settled the matter at any time, but he had an ambition to take the wrecker alive, and, watching his chance, he put in a piece of big work, and the dismayed outlaw found handcuffs neatly snapped upon his wrists.

He tried in vain to break them, and then, as the men fell back at the detective's word, he found the latter's revolver at his head.

"That will do, Brennan!" said the officer, as coolly as ever.

Black Barb stood still. He looked first at the handcuffs and then at Braceridge, a terrible fury in his broad face.

"Curse you!" he hissed; "I'll have your life for this!"

"Threatened men live long, and you are scarcely in a position to do what you say. You've made a good fight, but I hope you are sensible enough to go light now."

The wrecker wrenched vainly at his irons.

"You dassent take 'em off an' give me a chance like a man!" he grated, between his teeth.

"Whether I dare or not, I shall not take them off. I know your strength of old. You have ground your enemies under heel often enough, so you ought to know by their example how to take ill-luck."

"Dave Braceridge, it's your turn now," was the deep reply; "but I'm no more ter be kept down than a cyclone. I'll be on top ag'in afore long, an' when that day comes I'll have your life ez sure ez I live!"

"So you said before. Is there anything more?"

"Yes."

The wrecker turned slowly to Westcourt, looked him over from head to foot, and then smiled in a particularly disagreeable way.

"Hello, old man! how are you?" he then added, with an insolence and disdain which made the judge's blood boil.

"I am well enough to see my early predictions in regard to you fulfilled, Tom Wardsworth," was the retort.

Brennan laughed hoarsely.

"So you know me! I'm glad on't, brother-in-law, an' right glad that I kin rely on you as a friend in my present diffikilty. O' course, you'll smooth over the rough places an' git me out o' jail in a twinklin'."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," Westcourt declared. "If you are really Barb Brennan you deserve to hang, and hang you shall for all I will do to the contrary."

"You forget ther stain on ther family honor, old man."

"Neither you nor your wretched wife are anything to me. I wash my hands of the whole affair, and you will have to stand your trial."

Barb laughed again.

"Go it, old man! Do you s'pose I'd take a favor from you? No; not ter save my life. Keep your place, and I'll keep mine, but o' one thing be sure—the whole world shall know that we are brothers!"

Words of anger and disgust trembled on the judge's lips, but he was shrewd enough to perceive that the wrecker was trying to annoy him all he could, and he assumed an air of cold disdain and said no more.

It was a moment of proud triumph for the detective. He had done what other men had long tried in vain to do, and he was proud of his work. There was a good-sized reward offered for the desperado's capture, but that was a small matter compared with the professional triumph he had won. To capture Barb Brennan was to have his name sounded all through the West, and favorably mentioned in the East.

Brennan no longer tried to resist, but, having done what he could to make Westcourt unhappy, he relapsed into sullen silence. He was dressed as usual, in the old slouchy suit which seemed incapable of fitting any one, the red handkerchief around his neck making a flaring companion to his ebon-black hair and long mustache; and he looked none the worse for his stay in the secret room.

He was led out to where the other detective had Meg in custody, and husband and wife gazed at each other in silence. The unhappy woman was deathly pale, and looked so unutterably wretched that Braceridge's heart bled for her. But a suspicious gleam came into Barb's eyes, and he looked next at the detective.

"How was I took?" he asked.

"Your wife was captured while trying to get food," replied David, promptly, resolved not to betray her.

The explanation was so simple that the wrecker's suspicions vanished. He had thought, forgetting her years of devotion, that she had deliberately betrayed him, but he wanted her aid now too much to antagonize her uselessly.

"I s'pose we've got ter go ter prison now," he said, morosely.

"Your wife is free to go where she will," Braceridge replied.

A glitter appeared in Barb's eyes.

"You know ther lawyer I want," he said, looking hard at Meg, and the detective knew there was a hidden meaning in his words.

"Yes."

The woman's pale lips framed the words, but there was no audible sound.

"I've done nothin' wu'th bein' arrested fur," added Brennan, with a grim facetiousness not to be expected then, "an' I'll soon git released when my case comes up. I'm ready fur travel."

Westcourt invited Braceridge to keep his prisoner there over night, but the jail at Belplain was, of course, the only fit place for him, and they prepared to go. Meg arose hastily as she saw this, but the judge's anger was still burning against his luckless sister and he could not allow her to go in peace. He went to her side and spoke in his harshest manner.

"Of course I need not remind you that there is no shelter for you here," he said.

She turned on him with a cold disdain, but with a latent suggestion of deadly enmity which he had not expected. Now that the blow had actually fallen, she became transformed from a weak woman to a strong and relentless enemy of Barb Brennan's enemies.

"Rest easy," she said, with cold scorn. "I would not accept the shelter of your roof if you begged me on your knees to do so. I despise you, and your friendship would be a curse to me now. Rest easy, sir, I ask no favors of you, but, mark my words, within a week you shall be asking favors of me and imploring my mercy. I will bend your will, judge, or break it!"

CHAPTER VII.

TEMPLETON'S PAPERS.

WESTCOURT treated this threat with lofty disdain, but Meg had said all she wanted to, and she wrapped about her shoulders the shawl one of the cowboys had brought her and glided from the room. As she passed Barb a look of such significance passed between them that Braceridge was led to wonder what it meant. He did not forget it, and, later, its meaning was forcibly explained.

But Meg had not left the house before she was confronted with Miriam, whose handsome face bore a hard, harsh look unusual to her.

"Stop!" she said, imperiously, and Meg quietly obeyed. "I want to speak with you."

"I am listening," said the wrecker's wife, gently.

"You have done your best to ruin my life," bitterly exclaimed the heiress.

"You are mistaken, child; I have done my best to save you from ruin."

"It is false—false as perdition itself. How dared you calumniate my chosen husband?"

"I have said nothing that was not true, and the proof lies in the fact that I have, perhaps, brought my own husband to ruin and death to save you. Barber Brennan is my husband, and the officers have hunted him as though he were a wild beast. We reached, at last, a hiding-place where we could defy them. I assert that in the secret room they would never have found us. I was feeling secure when I learned that you were to be married, and to Cain Magruder. I

was thus placed in a terrible position. To let the marriage go on was to allow you to unwittingly destroy yourself—"

"I am the best judge of that!" flashed Miriam.

"Had you known his real character, I admit that you were."

"What do you know of him?"

"I know he was once a member of the train-wrecker gang; that he was a thief and—and a murderer!"

"How dare you say that?"

"I have seen him shoot unarmed men."

"You condemn him, but is not *your* husband the leader of the gang? Do you not keep their company?"

"To both questions I answer yes; and I may add: Look at me and see the result!"

She threw back her shawl and her tangled hair, the one movement showing her rags; the other, her pale, worn face, was an answer more eloquent than words, and Miriam stood speechless, her face softening a little.

"Child," continued Meg, huskily, "miserable as I am, I am your aunt, and I was once young and happy, with a future which looked as promising as yours. Barber Brennan is my husband, and I will follow his desperate fortunes as long as we both live; I will sin, or die, for him, if necessary; but, here, with you, speaking as woman to woman, I say that my own mad, heedless infatuation for him in my youth has ruined me, body and soul."

"I am sorry for you," was the reply, and Miriam's voice was even gentle and tender.

"Don't say it; don't think it. Leave the outcast and her desperate fortunes alone. Prudence on my part would have saved me once; nothing can save me now. Pity is wasted; do not speak of it. All I want is to convince you that, in venturing out to unmask Cain Magruder, I knew that I was putting the life of my husband in jeopardy; that the blow has fallen as I feared; and that the sacrifice has made my life a blank. Do you, then, believe me when I say that my pity for you was so great that I risked all to tell what Magruder really was?"

"I believe you were sincere, but it must be a mistake in identity; I am sure Dane is not—"

"Miriam, I saw him daily for over a year, and it is less than a year since, getting considerable money from a train, he left the band. I can swear to his identity!"

The heiress did not answer. She knew not what to say to such a positive assertion, but her faith in Dane Templeton did not waver. It must be a case of mistaken identity. She would not believe otherwise. She had the usual loyalty and blindness of women in such cases.

Meg wrapped her shawl once more about her with an unmistakable gesture.

"Are you going?" Miriam asked.

"Yes."

"Stay here until morning. I will make you as comfortable as possible. Whatever has happened, your are my aunt and—"

A cold smile had curled Meg's lips.

"I am not your aunt. The bond was rejected years ago, by both your father and myself. No, I am not a Westcourt. On the contrary, I am the bitter enemy of the family. Having saved you, or having tried to save you, my work is done, and when next we meet we shall be enemies. Matters have come to a pass that my own fortunes require me to make war on Judge Westcourt, and I shall do it. Say no more, and do as you will about Cain Magruder. I have placed the man I love in danger of the gallows to save you; now, if you do not appreciate the sacrifice, go your own length!"

Her manner had grown harsh and savage, for she felt that the fresh young beauty before her was the real cause of Barb Brennan's present misfortune, and she gave her shawl one more twist and strode from the house without again looking around.

The cowboys, lingering near the door, looked at her with little sympathy; they would much rather she had been arrested with her husband; but Braceridge was master in that matter and they said nothing. They acted as a part of the guard which soon took Black Barb to the jail, however, and felt themselves honored. It was as though a Bengal tiger, which had long preyed upon the people, had been arrested.

He was lodged in Belplain jail, and then Braceridge sent a dispatch to those who had employed him, asking for instructions. The answer came back quickly; Brennan was to be kept in his present quarters until the other detectives, who were pursuing his band, had time to secure those slippery gentlemen. Until that time Braceridge was to remain at the village with his prisoner.

"I'm afraid the order will either be countermanded, or that I shall grow gray waiting," was the detective's grim comment, when he read his instructions.

This was during the forenoon following the arrest, and, soon after, he was surprised to see Mr. Dane Templeton walk in upon him. He looked at the fellow sharply, half expecting to see a revolver come out for use, but the visitor's manner was peaceful enough.

"I've come to have a frank talk," he said, amicably enough.

"Very well; I am at your service."

"We had words last night, and you knocked me down—"

"Pardon me, I only pushed you one side. You fell, it is true, but not from a blow."

"I accept your correction. The point is immaterial, however, for I have decided that you were only doing what seemed your duty, and I believe an officer is naturally rather harsh. But let that pass. Do you believe me to be Cain Magruder, the ex-outlaw?"

The question was pleasant enough, and the detective smiled.

"On that point I can give no opinion, for I know nothing about it, sir."

"You had an opinion last night."

"And you were hostile to me last night."

"Granted. Now, let us begin anew. I am not Magruder, of whom I never heard until last night, but Dane Templeton. I am on my way to Westcourt's to offer him proof. First, I wish to prove the fact to you. I was born at Craftsbury, Georgia, where my family lived for years before the War of Independence. We have lived there ever since. We own—or I may say, for I am the sole heir, I own—a large plantation, and am prosperous in the world. Allow me to show my proofs."

He produced a large package of papers, and exhibited them one after another. The most important was a general letter of introduction from an ex-Governor of Georgia, while others were ordinary letters and business papers. Templeton was careful to show that the dates of the letters covered a space of two years, and that each was accompanied by an envelope, properly post-marked.

All seemed correct and satisfactory, and Braceridge said as much; but as he was not working up Templeton's case, he really took no great amount of interest in the matter. Dane, however, said that, owing to the malicious charge of Brennan's wife, he was placed in an unpleasant position. The previous evening he had allowed his temper to run away with him, for which he was now sorry, and he now proposed to prove his real position and live down the idle tale told by Meg Brennan.

Braceridge disputed nothing, and when they parted it was amicably, but neither was satisfied.

"Why was he so anxious to convince me?" wondered David. "Was it because I was a detective and might inquire too closely into his affairs? All his elaborate proofs amount to nothing, and if Cain Magruder was my game I should at once seize Dane Templeton. Of course Westcourt will not believe him."

And Templeton thought:

"I hope he believed all I said, but he took the proofs too quietly to please me. He was more indifferent than convinced, and I wish the fellow was dead. I am playing a dangerous game, and his keen, cold eyes worry me."

The speaker rode straight to Westcourt's, where, to his surprise, he was ushered into the presence of both the judge and Miriam—he had expected that, if he was received at all, it would first be by the former. He was greeted politely by Westcourt, and by Miriam in such a way that he knew her affection had not wavered.

"I have come to prove my innocence of certain charges made against me," he said, abruptly.

"We will hear all you have to say," the judge replied.

"I want you to examine the papers I have here. I have arranged them in order, and each will tell its own story."

He passed them to Westcourt, who began to examine them with the systematic manner of a business man. Miriam gave her lover a glance which reiterated her faith in him. Yet, she dared say nothing as yet, and silence reigned except for the rustling of the papers. The judge was going through them carefully. He finally laid them down and looked at Dane.

"They seem to be perfectly regular," he observed.

Templeton brightened.

"I trust that you regard them as proving my innocence."

"They are in your favor, yet they do not prove that you are not Cain Magruder."

"You can see by them that I was in Mexico when the so-called Cain Magruder flourished in Colorado."

"Is there anything to show that Magruder remained all the time in Colorado? As I understand these wreckers, they go and come all the way from the Mississippi to the Pacific, when there is a chance for plunder."

"Great heavens! sir, do you still believe me guilty?"

"I did not say so, Mr. Templeton. On the contrary, I am anxious to think otherwise. I merely spoke of the value of these papers as proof. Can you not produce witnesses to the fact that you were in Mexico continuously during the time these letters were being written to you there?"

"Hardly, for I was traveling, as they show you, and alone. But the letters are frequent—how could I skip from Mexico to the Overland, and herd with the Brennan outlaws? I am re-

a will-o'-the-wisp, nor have I seven-league boots."

Dane spoke somewhat bitterly, and Miriam came bravely to the rescue. She declared that she thought the evidence conclusive.

"You have not read a paper," said Westcourt, dryly.

"I heard you talking about them," she retorted. "Dane's explanation seems plain and satisfactory to me."

"I'm afraid yours is not a judicial mind. Still, I am not inclined to be severe. My decision is that, while the wedding is indefinitely postponed, the engagement shall exist, and your standing be as it has been, until I have looked further. I am sorry to seem harsh, Templeton, but for Miriam's sake I must be just. Innocence can bear investigation, and it shall be that of a father, not a judge's. Let us leave it this way."

CHAPTER VIII.

TROUBLE FOR THE JUDGE.

WESTCOURT bothered himself very little about Barb Brennan, not once going near the jail. Had he received orders to put him on trial in Belplain he would have gone about the work in his usual relentless way; but as it was highly probable that the trial would be many miles away, the judge did nothing whatever.

"But of course," he said to Miriam, "the fellow will be hanged. The blood of a score of men is on his hands."

The girl shivered.

"He looked like a terrible man; I could think of nothing but a caged tiger when they had him here!"

"The comparison is not new, but it is good."

"But I—I am rather sorry for—"

She hesitated, and Westcourt turned fiercely upon her.

"For whom?" he asked.

Miriam had hesitated what name to use, but his sternness aroused her own temper, which was that of a Westcourt.

"For aunt Margaret."

The judge's eyes flashed.

"Girl!" he said, in a terrible voice, "you used that term in defiance. Now, hear me! I swear that if you repeat it you shall never marry Dane Templeton. Meg Brennan is neither your aunt nor my sister. I cast her off when she married a man I hated, and if she lay starving at my door I would not feed her. Have you known me all these years and learned me so little?"

Thoroughly alarmed, Miriam hastened to mollify him, and he reproved her no more. He did, however, refer again to the Brennans.

"I hate them both, and as there is a chance that they may cast disgrace on our names, I shall hail the hour when they are past doing it. That bloodthirsty wretch who has been the terror of the Overland route will soon be hanged, and the world will be the better for it. As for his wife, she may have the good sense to suicide."

Miriam shivered.

"Do you remember her parting threat?"

"Yes, and laugh at it. What can she do to me more than she has already done?—betray our former relationship? I defy her."

Just then a servant appeared and announced that a man and young woman wished to see him.

"Who are they?"

"They gave no names."

"Some law business, I suppose."

Westcourt arose carelessly and went to the room which served him as a semi-office, when not in the village, library and reception-room. He found there a man of middle age and a young girl, but, as the light was not strong, he saw no resemblance to any one he had ever seen before.

"Judge Westcourt, I believe," said the man, bluffly.

"That is my name, sir."

"Mine is Aaron Thomas; this is my niece, Rose Thomas."

The opening promised well for a short interview, and the judge was pleased to be graciously polite.

"We have come on business," said Thomas.

"I am at your service."

"Important business."

Westcourt looked more keenly at the speaker. His face showed that he was of a bluff, blunt nature, but it struck the judge there was a latent curtness and hostility about his manner.

He was plainly a man of common life; his garments were coarse and ill-fitting, and his big hands were red and calloused. Some neighboring tiller of the soil, probably.

The girl looked as unlike him as was possible. She was small, rather delicate-looking and shy. She shrank back from the cold judge and looked at him with wondering blue eyes. Her face was slightly sun-browned, but was naturally fair. She was of that class of women one instinctively likens to kittens. And one would say at first sight that she was a kitten without claws; but appearances are often deceptive.

Westcourt somewhat curtly bade Mr. Thomas proceed.

"Do you see anything familiar about this here girl?"

"She appears to be a stranger to me, sir."

"You ought ter know her."

"Indeed! Why so?"

"Because she is Mabel Carter's daughter."

The judge started perceptibly.

"You are her father!" Thomas added, harshly.

Westcourt flashed a glance at Rose's face, which showed that he was really interested at last, but whatever he thought his cold face told no tales, and he turned back to Thomas with that angry frown which so awed criminals when they were in the dock and the judge at his desk.

"What rubbish is this?" he haughtily demanded.

"Before I get through," replied Thomas, with quiet resolution, "I'll show you thar ain't much rubbish about it. I'm Mabel Carter's brother; this girl is my niece, an' I think it's about time fur you ter look arter your own flesh an' blood!"

"This girl, as you call her, seems to be nearly twenty years old. Why have you never applied to me before?"

"Because I only jest found that Roderic Easton was Judge Westcourt, o' Belplain."

"I know nothing about your Roderic Easton," replied the judge, with cool disdain; "but it becomes plain to me that you are a black-mailer. Were it not for the girl, I would call a servant and have you flung out of the house."

"I very much doubt if you have a servant, or any two on 'em, who could put me out," was the sturdy reply, and Thomas held out his big hands. "Besides, Mister Easton, any sech course ez that would make me appeal ter law, instead o' yourself."

"Take care that you don't get more law than you want."

"Talk, empty talk. You can't skeer me fur a cent. Why, ef I'd a-known you years ago, I'd a-took your aristocratic lump o' flesh an' washed it out o' shape."

Westcourt looked steadily at the speaker. Greek had met Greek. The judge had found few men in all his life who had the strength of mind to stand up and oppose him successfully, but there was something about this sturdy tiller of the soil that told him to be of rare resolution. Hatred and implacable hostility were plainly expressed, but his voice never rose above an ordinary pitch.

No use to beat against such a rock.

He turned to Rose.

"Has the girl nothing to say for herself?"

His manner was overbearing; he hoped to frighten the "kitten," so that she would have no desire to prolong the interview.

"I may have something to say later. At present my uncle is speaking for me."

She spoke with a steadiness which surprised him. He began to suspect that the kitten had claws.

"Are you a party to this iniquitous claim?"

"It seems to me the iniquity is not in the claim, but in the events which made the claim necessary."

Aaron nodded emphatically.

"And are you aware that a false claim of this kind is punishable by law?"

"When we know of a false claim, we will talk about it."

Plainly, the kitten had claws. Westcourt was amazed. She looked utterly incapable of such firmness, and such practical replies, but they showed him that he had two cool-headed enemies to deal with. His strong face showed no signs of wavering, however.

"All this talk amounts to nothing, and I warn you that it will get you into trouble. Consider the difference in our worldly positions, and ask yourselves if it is wise to make such an enemy."

"That ain't the p'int, an' you need not worry about it, anyhow," Thomas answered. "Ef I had known whar you was, you'd have seen me around here long ago, an' the minute I did know I come. Now, we are goin' to have justice!"

"What do you call justice?"

"Recognition o' your daughter here."

"She is no daughter of mine."

"What if we go to law an' show our claims?"

"Do so as soon as you see fit. I am not the man to submit to blackmail. Still, it may be you are in earnest in thinking that I am this—what did you say was the name?—Roderic Somebody?"

"We are in earnest; so much so that we shall prove all we say. Mark that down!"

"You can prove nothing against me, for there is nothing to prove, but I am willing to help you. Tell me your story briefly. Who are you, and who was your sister? Let me know all, and I will give you my aid."

The judge spoke with a cold air which indicated that, though he disclaimed all responsibility in the affair, he was willing to give his attention to it in a purely legal way. This air had no effect on Aaron, who smiled contemptuously.

"It's a short story, soon told, an' ef it will do you any good you kin hear it. My name is not Thomas; I took that name when you disgraced the one borne by me an' my sister, Mabel. Our name was Carter. We lived in Kansas, at the town of Gray Rock. You know whar that is, mebbe; ef you don't I'll say it's nigh enough to Missouri so that its people are a good 'eal like

Missourians. From that State came our family, an' Mabel an' me never had any great amount o' schoolin'. You kin see that by my talk, which ain't fancy. I don't know that my ignorance has ever did me much harm, but it did her a heap."

Aaron paused, and, for the first time, showed actual feeling. His broad forehead contracted into a ferocious scowl, and he looked at Westcourt as though he longed to seize upon him then and there. But he made no rash movement.

"It did Mabel a heap o' harm," he repeated.

"Oblige me by proceeding with your story."

"It'll come soon enough, don't fear. We was poor whites; Missourians who had taken advantage o' the free-s'ile movement ter go over inter Kansas an' git a new home, but we made ther move too late ter git a Kansas education, an' we carried Missouri ways an' ignorance with us. I was a big, awkward young feller who never knew where to put his hands an' feet when in-doors, but Mabel was a lady born. She looked much as Rose, hyar, does now, an' she was as graceful as an Eastern belle. She took it nat'rally, but nobody kin be educated without teachers or books."

"This part seems to me superfluous," said the unmoved judge.

"That is one o' your numerous mistakes. I want ter show why Roderic Easton deserted her. Wal, when we got the new place fairly a-goin', I left ther family an' struck out fur myself. In other words, I married an' settled fifty miles north o' my father's. Arter that I was so busy, startin' out in the world, that I had no time ter visit my folks for over a year. Probly I should not have gone then, but I got a letter that stirred me up like a touch o' fire. It was a mere scrawly line, and read summut like this:

"For God's sake, come home at once. Mabel has been deserted by her husband, an' your father has dropped dead with heart disease. You are needed at once!"

CHAPTER IX.

MEG BRENNAN'S OATH.

AARON uttered the words as though he were reading them from a paper, and his gaze, fixed on vacancy, had a horrified stare as though he had just received that startling message; but he quickly threw off this air and continued:

"I went to Gray Rock with all possible haste, an' when I got thar I found a house o' mournin'. My father lay dead in one room, an' in another Mabel lay sick to a degree that scared me for her life. When I went in she lifted a pale, pitiful face, an' then flung her arms 'round my neck an' burst inter tears. I was horrified ter see how she had wasted away, an' it war not in a very calm style that I tried ter calm her.

"Oh! Aaron," she sobbed, "you are all I hev lefi now!"

"Cheer up," says I; "I'm with ye now, an' I'll take care o' ye."

"It's too late," says she, in a pitiful voice. "Father is dead, an' I want ter die, too. I will die!"

"I ain't got ther words ter tell how it hurt me ter hear her. I loved her like my own life, an' she deserved it, fur she war as kind an' tender herself ez woman could be. She had always been a meek an' gentle little thing, an' now that her trouble had come she jest bowed ter ther storm an' wilted all away. Her heart was broke!"

Judge Westcourt moved uneasily. Stern as he was, this retrospection touched him, and the unwavering gaze which Rose kept on his face was even worse. She might be as small as her mother was, but she had none of her mother's meekness. She was not one to bow feebly to a storm; her blue eyes were full of menace and antagonism.

"It had been a mystery ter me ter know what ther letter meant which mentioned her husband," Aaron continued, "for I had never heerd o' any husband, so I went ter work ter find out jest what it meant. But it needed ther voice o' ther neighbors ter make ther case wholly plain. Some time before that a stranger had come ter ther town ter regain his health, which was not good. He gave ther name o' Roderic Easton, an' soon won ther good will o' ther people by his soft, oily ways.

"He did more. He took a fancy ter Mabel, or seemed to, an' began ter pay her a good e'le o' attention. He was older than her by a good bit, but his polished ways took her fancy, as they will bewitch a girl who ain't used ter them. They think a pretty speech is gentlemanness, an' a good sentiment a sign o' honor. It wa'n't so with Easton. He wound himself around Mabel's affections, but he war a cursed serpent."

Again Westcourt stirred uneasily. Rose was regarding him with fresh menace in her eye, and as he marked her resemblance to one he had known in bygone days, he almost expected her parted lips to sound reproaches in the voice of the wronged Mabel.

"You are making your story unnecessarily long," he said, curtly, as Aaron paused.

"Maybe, an' maybe not. I only want to show how he took advantage of her ignorance, fur ef she had known the world ez well as he did, she would never have consented ter a secret marriage. Ther mere fact that he proposed one

showed ther cloven foot, but he gave plausible reasons an' she fell inter the trap. They was married, an' Easton lingered in ther place, regainin' his health, but showin' no haste ter acknowledge ther marriage.

"Finally, ther time came when it could be hid no longer, an' my father learned all from Mabel's lips. He learned, too, that she did not know ther man who had married them, more than that his name had been given to her as Moulton. She had never lost faith in Easton, but my father at once took the alarm. He knew enough o' ther world ter be sure it was no good reason that made Easton keep ther matter hushed up.

"He went ter look fur Easton at once. Ther latter boarded at a house on a bluff, at a p'nt whar thar was a high gray cliff that gave its name ter the town. He found Easton packin' his things fur a hurried flight, fur something Mabel had that day said warned him their secret was no longer safe. He called the villain outside, an' thar on ther front o' the bluff they had a talk ter which Easton's landlady listened from a window with indignation, at first, an' then horror.

"She told me that father talked quickly and peaceably, only askin' justice for Mabel, but Easton saw there was no puttin' him off with pritty promises as he had done ther girl, an' then he got mad an' declared that ther marriage was a sham, an' that he would never make it legal. Then thar was a quarrel. Father's anger rose, an' ther listening woman trembled at their talk. It was hot an' angry, and Easton taunted ther old man past endurance."

Westcourt's gaze wavered. The memory of that dark night was not a pleasant one. Aaron, however, never turned his gaze from the haughty face before him, and he went on inexorably:

"Finally a blow was struck. Who began it ther woman could not tell in the darkness, an' ther fight which follered left her almost paralyzed. She knew they had grappled an' was fightin' still, an' she heard Easton curse. I hev before said thar was a gray cliff jest in front o' the house, an' as they worked that way she grew dizzy from ther fear that they would fall over. She was in this mood when she heard Easton's voice, sharp an' clear.

"Let go!—curse you, let go, or I'll fling ye over the cliff!"

"Thar was no answer, an' ther fight went on fiercely. But only for a half minute. Then there was a lull, an' she knew one o' them had gone over ther precipice. When this became clear, all grew dark around her an' she lost consciousness. Life faded away, an' it was half an hour later when it came back. Then she remembered all. She rushed down ther stairs. All was still there, but she saw at first glance that Easton's things were gone. He had improved ther lull ter git his baggage away. She rushed from the house; the silence all about showed her that no alarm had been sounded. None of the other people knew of the tragedy at the cliff.

"She told all, however, an' men turned out expecting to find Joseph Carter a mangled corpse at the foot o' the gray cliff. It was not so: a little shelf of rock had saved him, an' he lay senseless so near the top that he was drawn up without great trouble. He learned that Easton had fled, an' then, going home, died in his chair within the hour. Heart-disease, the doctors called it. A broken heart, I say."

"It was to this home I returned; my father was dead, my sister ill; an' thar was people who did not hesitate to say her marriage was illegal. I thought so, too, and when I had searched in vain for the man who had married her, an' found that it was no resident o' the town where the ceremony had taken place, I gave up all hope.

"My story is almost ended. I took my sister to my own home, an' then I went in search o' Roderic Easton. I looked far an' wide, but as I had only a picture with which to identify him, it was difficult work. Yet, I passed weeks and months in searchin'. At last I returned, hopeless. I found my sister dead, but she had left behind her a child which lived to grow to womanhood. You see her now!"

He pointed to Rose, but the judge only nodded.

"My sister's story had spread fur an' near, an' I found that ev'ry one either pitied or scorned her. Few believed she had been legally married. Then it was that I took my family an' moved away, changin' our name that it might not b'ar witness ag'in' ther child left on our hands.

"Wal, years passed, but I never furgot Roderic Easton. In them days my blood was hot, an' ef I had found him it would hev been my life or his. P'raps 'twas wal I did not find him then. When I knew ther truth I had grown older and calmer. I never knewed it till a month ago. But now, I am able to say, ther man who married them two was, an' is, James Gardner, now o' Lincoln, Nebraska, once a rovin' graduate o' a theological school. It was then he performed ther marriage."

Westcourt looked somewhat uneasy at last. The tiller of the soil had a stronger case than he liked to see.

"Well?"

"Furthermore, I kin prove that Roderic Easton an' Judge Westcourt are one. I have been lookin' up ther case, an' my witnesses are all in hand. By Colonel O'Day I kin prove that, twenty years ago, you was not prosperous, an' bein' in ill health, you went ter Gray Rock ter recuperate, ez ther colonel called it; an' on account o' yer debts you took ther precaution ter go under a false name, so you'd be free from them you owed. By Gardner I can prove that he worried you at ther time an' place named by my sister."

"You must have taken a good deal of trouble to get all this evidence," said Westcourt.

"I have, sir."

"Well, what good do you expect from it?"

"I expect you to recognize your child."

"Is she anxious to be taken to my arms?"

"Sir," said Rose, with calm disdain, "I would sooner be embraced by a rattlesnake. What I want is justice for my mother's name, and—my share of your property."

"Aha! I thought it would come to that, sooner or later."

"You scoundrel!" said Aaron, "do not be too free with your sneers. Eighteen years ago I would hev killed you ef I could put my hand on ye. Now, ez I said afore, I am cooler, but I am not more backward in askin' fur justice. It is my work that your daughter demands her share of your money; I had to talk long with her afore she would agree ter it. Justice will be done when you acknowledge ter ther world that Mabel Carter was your wife, but it is your punishment that you must part with your money. That haughty elder daughter of yours shall not rake in ther whole boodle, by a durned sight!"

Westcourt's eyes flashed.

"Be careful how you speak of Miss Westcourt!" he said.

"The elder Miss Westcourt?" coolly inquired Aaron.

The judge did not answer, but sat looking at his visitors in ominous silence. His face told nothing of what was passing in his mind, but Aaron could surmise enough to feel that their lives would not be allowed to stand in his way if he could safely remove them; but the sturdy farmer had perfect reliance in his own powers of resistance and self-protection.

As for Westcourt, he was guilty of all that had been charged against him, and he felt that it would be useless to deny it. The only question was, should he tamely submit to their claims, or temporize and play a trump card against them which would end his troubles forever? What the "trump card" would be, it was not hard to imagine.

The silence was broken in an unexpected way. There was a noise at the door, and as the judge looked up angrily to see who had dared intrude, he saw—Meg Brennan!

He arose quickly, an angry flush reddening his face, but she looked at him unwaveringly and he saw that she had lost a part of the hopeless appearance she had worn when Black Barb was captured.

"Stop!" she said, imperiously, as though she feared he was about to call a servant. "I swore an oath two days ago and its results are now before you. Do not force me to swear another, or you shall be crushed beyond relief!"

CHAPTER X.

THE PRICE OF SAFETY.

IT almost seemed as though the heavens themselves were crashing down on Judge Westcourt's head. He had been a haughty, stern and imperious man, who, both in private and public life, always had his own way without regard to others' woes or wishes. He was known as the most inexorable judge within a radius of two hundred miles, and report said many an innocent man had been convicted by him simply because, in his awful presence, they lost the courage to defend themselves properly.

Had the day now come when he was to be bullied by calloused-handed farmers and half-mad women?

He grew hot with rage at the thought.

"What do I care for you or your oaths?" he shouted. "By Heaven, I will have you arrested and lodged in jail with your brute of a husband. I know evidence enough can be found to convict you—if there cannot, evidence shall be made."

He was starting toward the door, resolved to carry out his threat, but Aaron seized his arm in an iron grasp.

"Wait!" he said. "That woman is my ally. Make war on her, an' you make war on me."

"Devils alive! is this true?"

"I warned you, Judge Westcourt, but you would not heed me," said the wrecker's wife. "You scorned me and exulted in Barb Brennan's downfall, and I swore to be revenged. You see the result. It is through me that these people have been able to hunt you down."

The judge looked at them in silence. He wished he was an old-time king, that he could have them seized and flung into one of the scientifically-fatal dungeons of that period; but as he was not, it was clear he must look elsewhere for a remedy.

"You are in good company, sir," he said, looking at Aaron with a sneer.

"We won't argue that. Ther fact that your own sister is against you proves ther kind o' a man you are. It seems, too, that there is a good deal o' Westcourt blood not generally recognized."

"I want to speak with you privately," said Meg, looking at the judge, and he detected a covert significance in the glance which led him to comply with a request he would otherwise have refused.

Aaron looked uneasy; but when Meg had said that they would not leave the room, he made no objection. It was, however, so long that what was said at the rear would not reach them at the front.

"I don't like this," he observed to Rose. "What kin they have ter say in privacy? Is ther woman goin' ter sell us out?"

"Why should she have put us on the track at all, if she intended to desert at this late hour?" Rose logically asked.

"There's somethin' in that; but I confess I don't like these infernal Westcourts, male or female. Poor child! it's no fault of yours that the blood is in your veins."

"I almost tremble to think I am making an enemy of my only surviving parent."

"Do not use the word—don't! He saw fit ter ignore your existence, an' you can well ignore his wishes now."

Poor little Rose! With all her firmness, it was far more to her taste to lead a quiet, loving life than to indulge in this bitter crusade into which her uncle had drawn her.

In the mean time the judge and Meg had gone aside. The wrecker's wife was the first to speak.

"Are you not sorry now that you persecuted me and mine so?" she abruptly asked.

"I had no share in capturing Brennan—"

"But you drove me out of the house as though I had been a leper. I am not sure I should ever have married Barber had not you opposed me so fiercely. I was then a mere girl. Brotherly kindness on your part might have shown me the danger I was incurring, but when you *ordered* me to give him up, all the Westcourt spirit rose within me, and I leaped into the gulf I had been hesitating to approach. Then you cursed and cast me off. Well, I went—and it was long years before we met again. How did we meet? You exulted in the capture of my husband, knowing they would hang him if they could, and you drove me out like an evil cur. I told you then I would have my revenge. You little knew how near my hand it was. I had already put Aaron Thomas on the track, for I was resolved that your unacknowledged daughter should have the justice which you never accorded me. But it yet remained for Thomas to get his most important evidence—that evidence I hastened to put into his hands as soon as I left here that night, and you see the result."

She pointed to the couple by the window.

"I see you are all leagued against me," said Westcourt, morosely.

"Has Thomas convinced you that he can prove his claim?"

"Is that a trap-question?"

"It is not."

"Well, his evidence seems too infernally conclusive."

"Shall you acknowledge Rose?"

"See here! To what does all this tend?"

"One question more. Do you *wish* to acknowledge her?"

Meg's coldness was giving place to perceptible excitement.

"No!" growled the judge.

"Shall I tell you how to escape it?"

He looked at her keenly.

"Yes."

"I will tell you. Aaron Thomas believes I am working solely for revenge, and with an eye only to his interest. Such was the case until Barber Brennan was captured; then I had a new object in life, and one which swept away all things else. When I left your house that night I said that within a week you should be asking favors of me. I had formed my plan like a flash. You shall hear it now. Aaron Thomas knows very little of my ruling passion, and he does not suspect that I am making a cat's-paw of him. Yet, such is the case. Treachery to them on my part may be reprehensible—I know it is—but I must look first of all to myself. Brinsley Westcourt, if you will free Barber I will save you from Thomas and the girl!"

"Aren't you rather late with your offer, when they already have the game in their hands?"

"It is not in their hands. It is in my hands, and mine only. Aaron Thomas is not so much a man of the world as he believes himself to be. Positively as he has spoken, he cannot prove that you were ever married to Mabel Carter. The minister he referred to will swear that he married you to *some one*, at the time mentioned, but he cannot say it was Miss Carter. In my hands alone are the proofs. I have the marriage-certificate he gave, and I can produce the man who carried you and Mabel in a carriage to be married. Aaron Thomas makes the

assertions; I hold the proofs. Remember that Mabel, too, was married under a false name."

Westcourt's face had brightened.

"Do you speak truthfully?" he asked.

"Did you ever know me to lie?"

"You might, to save Barb Brennan."

"Then let me put the question in another form. Do you suppose that, relying on you to rescue Barber, I should have gone so far as to bring Thomas and Rose here if, by so doing, I would destroy my own last hope? No, I, and I alone, can prove that you were legally married to Mabel Carter. This fact I will prove if you defy me, but if you will save him I will save you."

Meg spoke with feverish excitement, and the red glow which had mounted to her formerly pale cheeks gave her such a touch of her youthful looks that Brinsley Westcourt seemed carried back over the long stretch of years. He was in a desperate situation, and it had finally occurred to him that he must put his pride aside and treat with some one. He had faith in his sister's word, much as he had wronged her, and he decided to seem to yield to her plan.

To seem to yield, for it was not a part of his nature to give way to any one, and he resolved that, by playing a careful game, he would defeat both Aaron Thomas and the wrecker's wife. But his strong face did not betray his mental plotting.

"How can I save Brennan, when he is in the hands of the law? He is David Braceridge's prisoner, not mine."

"You are fertile enough at expedients to get him out somehow."

"But what pledge have I that you will not furnish Thomas with all these proofs, the moment Brennan is free?"

"First, I will give you the marriage-certificate to destroy."

"So far, good. But, wait! Now that I think the matter over, I never knew that a certificate was filled out," said the judge, with a suspicious look.

"It was handed to the driver of your carriage, who first forgot to deliver it, and then left the neighborhood. Afterward, he did not think it important enough to attend to."

"Decidedly irregular."

"So was your part."

"Score one for you; I admit it. Well, we were talking about my means of security. What next?"

"The moment Barber is free I shall disappear, and they will be without their ally. I believe, with your private and political power, you can then manage them easily."

"So I can, and I accept your proposal. Barb Brennan shall be liberated—how, I cannot at this moment tell. But I will arrange it. We are to keep faith with each other?"

"For my part, I swear to be true to my promise."

"So do I," added Westcourt, who then mentally added:

"My promise is to send Barb Brennan to purgatory."

"But how will you manage Thomas?"

"You may re-open the discussion by saying that I want four days' delay. You will oppose the request—but be careful and not give any really important reasons—and then I will overrule both you and Aaron Thomas, who will of course join in. Now, let us return, and contrive to look angry, as though we had quarreled."

It was time for them to return, for the bluff tiller of the soil was becoming decidedly impatient, and, naturally, suspicious that this long conference meant something hostile to his own interests. Before the conversation could be resumed, however, a servant opened the door.

"A gentleman to see—"

"Show him to the other room!" curtly ordered Westcourt, who did not care to have all the wide West in his room.

"To see Miss Thomas," finished the interrupted servant.

"To see me!" echoed Rose, in surprise.

But at that moment the servant was pushed aside and a young man strode into the room. In the clear-cut, resolute face we recognize John Loring, the Overland conductor, but his usual frank expression had been superseded by a sour and hostile one as he fixed his gaze on the judge.

"John!" said Rose, joyfully.

"In a moment, my dear. I have one word to say to this man first," and he kept his gaze fixed on Westcourt.

"You scoundrel!" roared the latter, "get out of my house!"

"I shall go in good time. Don't try to hurry me, for you haven't a man who can put me out by force, and if they try it you may find that you have barked up the wrong tree. Keep your hands off, my lord judge, or somebody will get hurt!"

CHAPTER XI.

A CHAMPION COMES TO GRIEF.

MISFORTUNES are said to hunt in pairs. In the judge's case, they seemed to have formed themselves into a regiment, well-drilled, uniformed and sagacious, with a faculty for dropping in one at a time in a personified way, and each and all bringing misery to him who had

heretofore reigned at Belplain as a sort of absolute monarch.

In the case of John Loring, however, there was no great mystery. Six months before the judge had notified the railroad company that, while riding in one of their cars, he had lost a sum of money, and he had done his best to throw guilt upon the conductor. An examination followed and Loring was triumphantly acquitted, though the thief was not found.

In the opinion of both Loring and the company, there had been no thief and no robbery, but the matter was still a mystery. The enmity of the conductor was thus explained: he believed that the judge, to further some unknown private motive, had deliberately tried to make him out a thief.

Consequently, he was not particular what words he chose on the present occasion. The loudness of his tone reached even the ears of the servants, however, and another visitor, who had been waiting an hour to see Westcourt, unsuspecting of the stirring scene occurring so near him, laid down his book in wonder.

This visitor was Mr. Dane Templeton.

If there was anything Judge Westcourt was noted for not being, it was weak and cowardly, and he met John Loring's last impetuous blast as a rock meets the wind.

"You scoundrel!" he said, again, "how dare you address me thus in my own house?"

"I did not know that it required any great amount of bull-dog grit, but we will let that pass. I am not under your roof because I covet the honor of being here—believe me, I never covet anything too small to be seen—but because I object to Miss Rose Thomas, my betrothed, breathing the air of a ranch owned by such a consummate scoundrel as yourself. By which, you see I can bandy cheap *sobriquets*, or whatever you call 'em, as well as you. Scoundrel, villain and ruffian are all fine titles."

"John," interposed Rose, "what is the matter with you? How came you here? Why are you not on your train? Why in the world do you talk so?"

"Put your questions in writing, my dear, and I'll answer them if you'll bear the expense of the pens I use up in doing it. But, just now, make little talk, but get away from this house. The dickens knows why you are here; I don't, but I know why you're going. Come on!"

"Not so fast!" interposed Aaron, sternly. "You don't know what you're talkin' about, Jack. Rose an' me are hyer on busines, an' we ain't goin' till it's done. Set down an' wait!"

"This man shall not sit down in my house!" declared the judge. "Here!—James! Rufus!"

"Keep off your dogs," said Loring, coolly. "I don't hanker for any row. All I want is my promised wife; she can't stay in your house. Come, Rose!"

"Stop!" cried Aaron. "She can't go until this business is done."

"By all the fiends!" roared Westcourt, losing all control of his temper at last, "I'm not going to listen to all you chattering magpies. James and Rufus, throw that fellow out!"

John Loring put up his arms like a skillful boxer.

"James and Rufus," he coolly added, "keep away, or I will not be responsible for your doctors' bills."

The matter bade fair to become a riot, a free fight, or some other cheerful pastime, for the judge's temper had been too severely tried to bear more. He hated Loring because he had not been able to get him discharged, and to have him come into the house and practically defy him was a little more than Westcourt flesh could stand.

By this time all the household had gathered, and among the rest, there were Miriam and Mr. Dane Templeton. Miss Westcourt had been aware that her father had visitors, but she had not before supposed they were on the war-path, and the ominous state of affairs now alarmed her as much as a Westcourt could conscientiously allow herself to be alarmed.

"Oh! Dane," she exclaimed, "save father, won't you?"

Miriam's lover was both strong and brave, and as he heard this appeal it suddenly occurred to him that this was a providential occasion for sending his stock, which had gone down so lamentably when he was charged with being Cain Magruder, away up above par and to a degree calculated to astonish even old brokers. By fighting for the judge he could win that gentleman's good will, which is no small matter in the game of Cupid's field.

Acting on this impulse, he pushed forward and caught John Loring by the arm.

"See here," he said, brusquely, "you are not wanted here, and if you don't get out I'll throw you out!"

"Hello!" quoth the railroad man, "are you the mysterious James-Rufus, who is in such demand?"

"No matter who I am; there is the deer—get out!"

"All in good time. I have friends here; when I can persuade them to go I shall be pleased to shake the dust of this house from my feet."

"You will go now," said Dane, belligerently.

"Will I? How do you know?"

His cool indifference stirred Dane's temper to a boiling pitch, and he at once grappled and tried to force the conductor out of the house. The latter smiled calmly, and, laying hold of Mr. Templeton in return, whirled him to one side so resistlessly that he spun like a top and ended by falling over a chair. This article of furniture was crushed by the collision, but Dane was up in a moment, and in a worse mood than ever. He rushed at Loring and tried to beat him down with his fists, but it came to pass that all of his blows wasted their force on the empty air, while a single, well-calculated one in return, sent him again to the floor and started a red stream from his nose.

Westcourt was furious. The idea of a fight in his house was bad enough under any circumstances, but when his allies drew blanks to their adversaries' prizes, it was simply unbearable.

"James," he said, to his servant, "go for the sheriff!"

"Wait!" said Aaron. "Keep off your bulldogs, an' thar need be no trouble here. We don't want any. John Loring is ter marry my niece, Rose, an' he has a right ter say a word fur her. But we don't any of us want trouble. Send out your servants, Judge Westcourt, an' let us finish our business, an' then we'll go away an' leave you unmolested."

The judge thirsted for revenge, but it occurred to him that to arrest Loring would be to meet unpleasant notoriety, and he calmed down somewhat and countermanded his order to James.

The latter remained at one end of the room with Loring, while Westcourt, Aaron, Meg and Rose went to the other, and Miriam, Dane and Rufus withdrew entirely. Loring looked at the secret conference with disapproving eyes, and then turned to James.

"Who was that fellow who tried to put me out?" he asked.

"That, sir, was Mr. Dane Templeton, of Georgia."

"The blazes it was!" ejaculated John, with such evident astonishment that James decided that the athletic conductor was startled at learning he had laid hands on such a noble person.

"Yes, sir."

"Dane Templeton, of Georgia?"

"Yes, sir. He comes from one of the oldest families, sir."

"Must be a descendant of Adam, then. Bless me! so that is Dane Templeton. And did I, a mere nobody, draw the patrician blood from his nose?"

"You did, and it was the pootiest lick I've seen in a year," said James, confidentially.

"I say, did you know this renowned hidalgo in Georgia?"

"No."

"Anybody 'round here who did?"

"No. Why?"

Loring chuckled.

"I was wondering if, being a pugilist here, he was not a scientific wrestler in Georgia; that's all."

James felt that there was more in Loring's words than was at first perceptible, but as the conductor did not see fit to explain, the matter dropped and Loring fell into deep thought. It was soon interrupted. Westcourt had proposed a postponement and easily carried his point, for the trouble which had occurred made even Aaron unfit for business. A three days' truce was agreed to. Aaron had at first held that one was enough, but the judge had firmly declared that, before he treated with them, he was going to satisfy himself that they were who they represented. Aaron Thomas might be Aaron Carter, and he might not. As for Rose, he had nothing to say just then.

All parties seemed anxious to avoid trouble, and the matter was soon settled. Aaron and Rose walked toward Loring, between whom and the judge passed glances decidedly hostile. Neither put his feelings in words, however. The trio prepared to go, and then Aaron looked for Meg Brennan.

He did not wish to leave his ally behind, to be subjected to Westcourt's arts. Her loyalty might be affected.

"Brennan's wife has already gone," the judge carelessly observed.

Aaron looked dissatisfied, but, accompanied by Rose and Loring, passed out of the house and started for the village.

"Now, then," said the conductor, "I would like to know what, in the name of the Sphinx, you were doing in that house."

"It's a long story, John," said Rose, with a sigh.

"I should suppose it might be. A visit to Brin Westcourt requires a good deal of explanation to tone it down."

"Now you are angry."

"I believe I am," was the frank reply. "I know a little something about the old fellow myself, as you may have suspected from the way I put on frills. Oh! he's a daisy, but he's of the kind that is best left to blossom unseen."

Rose promised him a full explanation as soon as they reached the Belplain Hotel, for there they were to stop for awhile, and he accepted the arrangement with his usual good humor. Aaron had nothing to say. Meg Brennan's sudden disappearance troubled him, and he could

not get rid of the idea that she intended treachery, though he did not see what harm she could do at that late hour of the game against Westcourt. He had yet to learn that some points are hard to prove at law, and that his case was not perfect.

His suspicion was correct; Meg was hovering in the house, and she reappeared as soon as they were gone.

"Well?" she questioned, looking at her brother.

"All well," he replied, coolly. "This delay gives me the chance I wanted, and we will try to get Brennan out of jail."

"Try!"

"Yes, try; for it will not be child's play to fool David Braceridge. I know him; he's a sharp, hard-headed fellow; and I must play my cards well to get his prisoner from under his eyes, and leave no evidence of my handiwork. How I shall do it I do not yet know, but the matter shall receive immediate attention. Until it is done I suppose we are allies to a certain degree, much as we both hate the idea, and we will work together. Come what will, Barb Brennan shall be released!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXPLOSION.

BLACK BARB BRENNAN and his captor, Braceridge, were seated together in the former's cell. It had been almost as much the detective's cell as his own ever since they came there, for he never left it except to eat his meals. The train-wrecker was confined as seemed fit for such a desperate prisoner. Unusually strong handcuffs were on his wrists, and Braceridge had called in a blacksmith, who, working under his orders, had made a chain belt for the prisoner, and then attached another chain which connected with a staple driven in the wall. Six feet of room were allowed him, but he could go no further.

He had exulted over these precautions, which showed in what respect his prowess was held, but the detective coolly listened to his jeers and said little in return.

Besides this Braceridge had his own bed made at one side of the cell, and the two men were together day and night. Braceridge was resolved that the wrecker, who had a wonderful knack for slipping out of tight places, should not escape through any neglect on his part.

The noted outlaw bore his captivity well for the greater part of the time, and joked with grim recklessness with Braceridge, but, now and then, he fell into moody meditation, and sat on the edge of his bed, silent for many minutes at a time. When he did this he was not a pleasant companion for a timid man. He had a habit of pulling one corner of the red handkerchief he wore about his neck into his mouth, after which he gnawed at it like a savage dog at a bone. Sitting thus, with his immensely broad shoulders, his black, Indian-like hair and barbarian face, with his fierce eyes glaring at the detective, or rolling about as though to find some avenue of escape, he was indeed of a character akin to a caged tiger.

Braceridge knew the man would gladly murder him and take to flight, but not for a moment did he worry over the situation. His courage was equal to even greater demands.

One evening the two men sat playing cards. Barb's facilities for handling the pasteboards were not of the best, but he managed to get along, and was in one of his most sociable moods.

The other occupants of the building were the sheriff, an assistant and a tramp who had been brought in much the worse for liquor. The latter had been given a place to sleep off his trouble, though the sheriff did not take the trouble to lock him up. When he regained consciousness he came out and mixed with the other men, and, by a coincidence, the three were also playing cards while Braceridge and Barb played in the other room.

The lights in the village were going out one by one, and nobody else was near the jail. Wait! Perhaps it would be better to say that no one was there who belonged to the place, or had an open motive in coming near.

At the rear of the building a peculiar scene was being enacted; one which would have impressed the detective as being suspicious could he have seen it. Four masked men were there, two of whom stood erect and, with revolvers in their hands, watched sharply for spies, while the others, wielding spades, were digging down under the outer wall of the jail.

The course of the cut they made slanted under the wall, and seemed to indicate that, while the majority of men were anxious to keep out of the place, they were anxious to get in.

All this had a decidedly suspicious appearance, and the sheriff and his assistant would have done well had they paid less attention to poker and more to the surroundings of the jail.

But, like the builders of the place, they relied on the strong walls, the heavy doors and other known precautions, and never imagined that lawless characters would try to undermine their stronghold.

The tramp was the jolliest character ever seen in the place. He had not recovered suf-

ficiently from his spree—they believed—to play a good game of poker, or to talk very coherently, but he managed to say a good many funny things in a funny way, and the officers enjoyed his company.

Now and then the tramp lost his rollicking air for a moment and listened intently. The others heard nothing, but he did, and he then talked the louder.

"What's in ther keg over yon?" he asked, briskly shuffling the cards.

"Powder," replied the sheriff, absently, as he looked at his cards.

"Keep it ter blow up pris'ners?"

"Sometimes."

"Don't try it on me. Ev'ry time I get pulled in, they tell me my destination is ther other way—down, you understand. It would be a hard blow if you should blow me up."

The tramp rattled his chair, making a good deal of noise, and would have fallen if the sheriff had not caught him. As he came back into proper position he slipped something into his pocket. The article looked like a revolver, but the others saw nothing of it.

When the trio sat down at the table the tramp had placed the chairs, and he had put them in such a position that, while he faced one of the inner rooms, their backs were that way. Thus it was that, shortly after this revolver episode, when a face appeared at the door the tramp saw it, and the others did not.

"It's all right—all right!" he said, in a distinct voice. "Good hand, I've got here; sheriff, I'm goin' ter clean ye out, this time."

"You can't do it," said the sheriff.

"But I hold ther trump keerds."

"Time will tell."

The tramp chuckled and beat a tune with his knuckles on the table. There was a gleam in his eyes which the others saw, but they attributed it to pleasure over the cards he held.

Once more, however, the tramp saw what they did not see, and his noisy antics prevented them from hearing the men who stole across the floor toward them, cat-like, and holding drawn revolvers, with which they seemed willing to shoot the officers in their backs if need be to accomplish their purpose.

The first warning came when there was a touch of something cold to their necks and a stern voice hissed:

"Be still, or you are dead men!"

And the tramp uncovered and thrust forward his revolver, covering the sheriff's breast.

"Be still, or you're a dead man!" he echoed.

The sheriff's hand had dropped to his pocket, but he found nothing.

"Here's your revolver," said the tramp, coolly. "I saw you load it carefully; you probably know what the result will be if you tempt me to press the trigger. Not a word, or I fire!"

The dismayed officers sat helplessly and hopelessly. They were no cowards, but it was clear that they had only to give the alarm and the threat would be kept. These masked men were in earnest; there was no doubt about that, and a live sheriff is better than a dead one, any day. Having no choice in the matter, they sat still and said nothing.

"That is right," said the tramp, who had suddenly got rid of all signs of drunkenness. "We don't want to hurt you, and we won't if you behave well. Act in a cranky way, though, and I will blow your brains out without mercy. Men, tie them up."

The sheriff rallied enough to ask what was wanted, but he got no satisfaction. In a very short time both he and his assistant were securely bound, and the latter was gagged. The masked men worked with celerity and skill, and the prisoners comprehended that they had fallen into a deliberate trap.

"Now," said the tramp, "we want a favor of you, Mr. Sheriff."

"It strikes me I am better fitted for receiving than for giving."

"Nevertheless, you can help us. We want you to call Detective Braceridge out here—wait! don't be in a hurry; I'll tell you when—and call in such a voice that he will not suspect anything is wrong. Say to him in a careless, unconcerned voice that you want to see him a moment, and bear this in mind—if you give him warning in any way, you are a dead man!"

There was an accent to the man's words which told that he was in full earnest, and not for a moment did the sheriff think of playing him false. He began to comprehend what was wanted, and he knew he had got to comply or be killed.

Consequently, he meekly told the tramp that he was ready to do the job faithfully.

Preparations were made. The bogus tramp sat down by the table and pretended to be asleep and the other men hid themselves here and there. One of them stood by the side of the door that led into Brennan's cell, and in his hand he held what looked like a bag filled with sand. Fresh directions were given the sheriff, and with a revolver at his head, he was warned that any attempt to play them false would result in instant death. He was a fairly brave man, but when thus informed he did not think of throwing away his life from devotion to duty.

All being ready, the door was pushed open

and the sheriff repeated the words dictated to him.

"Braceridge, step this way, will you? I want to see you a moment."

There was a stir within, the sound of footsteps, and then the detective appeared. He was wholly unconscious of danger, and as he passed the line of the doorway, the man with the sandbag had a good chance. He struck hard and sure, and Braceridge dropped without a word and lay perfectly still.

Then the gang stirred into sudden activity. Some gave attention to binding the detective, while the "tramp" hurried in to release Brennan. The sheriff groaned aloud. He felt that he was disgraced, though he had always tried to do his duty.

Brennan came out, and the officers expected he would at once insist on dispatching Braceridge. On the contrary, he looked at his enemy, laughed harshly and said nothing. The detective was soon bound, and then the jail-breaker prepared to depart.

There was, however, a sort of suppressed joy about them which the sheriff did not understand, and he tried in vain to discover what it meant. He was shown altogether too soon for his peace of mind. The tramp had charge of all, and under his directions the men laid hold of the powder-bag, dragged it to the center of the room, and began making preparations which filled the sheriff's mind with horror.

The tramp noticed this and laughed aloud.

"Do you catch on to the idea, my dear old friend?" he asked. "Dead men tell no tales, you know, and we are going to blow the whole crowd of you to Kingdom Come!"

Alarm would have made the sheriff eloquent, but the gag which had been applied to his mouth kept him from speaking in any way. He could only watch and look furiously at the jail-breakers.

The keg was properly arranged, and then a piece of lamp-wicking was attached and ignited at the further end. All this seemed very funny to the outlaws, but the sheriff's blood seemed to have turned to ice. He was menaced by a fate he did not by any means covet.

All was now ready for the departure of the gang, but, though the others seemed in haste to go, Black Barb did not appear content. He often looked at Braceridge, and plainly wished that the detective would recover his senses that he might be scoffed at. As that person did not stir, Brennan turned to the sheriff.

"Ef thar was a way ter work it," he said, gruffly, "I'd like ter save one o' you, in order that you might kerry a message from me ter ther cusses of law, but ther boyees sez it is best you should all be blowed up together, an' I reckon they're about right. So I'll send a letter by mail ter them, as I can't see otherwise. I'll say ter you, though, that the man who tries ter buck ag'in' Barb Brennan will find out sooner or later that he has tackled ther business eend o' a cyclone. You shot me up, an' now you're goin' ter glory. When that power explodes, thar won't be enough o' you left for a grave-digger ter set on. Good-by, an' sweet bo yer dreams!"

The wrecker seemed inclined to say more, but his rescuers called his attention to the rapidly-shortening string, and he wound up his oration and the party prepared to go. They took the same course by which the diggers had entered, and soon stood outside the jail.

The village seemed perfectly quiet, but they knew it would soon be emphatically awakened, and they did not tarry long. Horses were at hand, and they mounted and galloped away.

They had been gone upward of ten minutes when the air seemed rent by a tearing sound, the earth shook, and the jail was torn into many pieces, which went flying in all directions, impelled by the terrific blast they had arranged.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PURSUIT.

THE moment that the jail-breakers were fairly gone, the sheriff began heroic efforts to escape the fate they had doomed him to so coolly. He wrestled with his bonds and rolled about the room actively; an undertaking in which he was joined by his assistant; but he might as well have remained still.

As for the cause of alarm, the string burned steadily, and they knew that in a few minutes the fire would touch the powder. Then, the jail and all it contained would be torn to pieces.

Efforts were made to reach the keg and stop the fire, but the outlaws had arranged that part and their attempts were wholly useless. The keg, standing just beyond a door which was locked, could be seen through the bars, but not touched. Indeed, it was not sure they could have reached it anyway, for the key had been flung away, and the bars might have foiled them.

It was at this moment that Braceridge's voice arose, coolly enough, but reduced by the gag to a jumble hardly recognizable.

"Roll this way, sheriff."

"Great Scott! be you conscious?"

"Of course. Roll this way!"

The sheriff obeyed, and the two were soon side by side.

"We've got ter die," said the sheriff, dismally. "Perhaps so, but I won't go under without an

effort to save myself. I've been in a similar fix before. Lie still!"

As this direction was given the detective rapped his face against the sheriff's shoulder. The latter looked at him with wide-open eyes, believing that the danger, or the blow from the sand-bag, had turned Braceridge's head, but it was a calm, cool face which he saw, and David repeated his last direction and the peculiar motion almost simultaneously.

"What are you trying to do?"

"To remove this gag. Once it's out, we'll talk English, instead of this mongrel stuff. Lie still!"

"We shall be blown up in a minute!" said the terrified deputy, watching the trail of fire.

Braceridge made no reply, but another blow removed the gag, and then, with a series of quick evolutions he disappeared in the cell lately occupied by Brennan.

"He can't run far," said the deputy, actually glad to think that Braceridge must share their own fate.

Both men were looking at the fire and the powder.

"Three minutes 'll settle us," groaned the deputy.

"We've got to go some time."

"But I'm not ready now."

"Well, the fire seems about ready."

"It's hard ter die."

"Oh! no effort on our part is necessary."

The sheriff had resolved to die game, but it was more the stoicism of despair than any feeling of resignation.

"Only two inches more of the wicking," mumbled the deputy, from his gagged mouth.

"That's all."

"Braceridge won't escape by going in there. He's got to go, too."

"He isn't going just yet!"

The words came in the detective's cool, quick tones, and he emerged from the cell and sprung toward the little tongue of fire which was now terribly near the powder. It seemed a sort of toss of a coin whether man or fire did the set work first, but Braceridge never quailed. His foot came down with a stamp on the string, and the tongue of fire disappeared.

Their lives were saved.

Braceridge did not pause. He held a knife in his hand, and, wheeling to the other, he cut their bonds quickly.

"Out of here at once!" he ordered. "Those fellows have got a start, but we must run them down. Sheriff, get out half a dozen good men. Bretby, make sure that fire is wholly out, and then take care of the jail."

By the time he finished speaking he had the outer door unlocked, and as the sheriff had caught the infection from his crisp, business-like way, they hurried off together. It was not by any means Braceridge's intention to give up Barb Brennan. He blamed the sheriff for being taken unawares, but the fact that he had been was all the more reason why they should bestir themselves and wrest victory from the jaws of defeat.

"How in the world did you get out of your bonds?" asked the sheriff, as they ran.

"There was a loose knife in a chair in Brennan's room, and when I got my jaws at liberty I pulled it down with them, got it between my bound hands and cut my bonds. An old trick, and I played it successfully, though my wrists are pretty well chopped."

"I see, but—Eternal Moses!"

The sheriff broke off and jumped clear of the ground. That useful thing had shaken and quivered under their feet, and then came a tremendous explosion, as of a cargo of dynamite. They wheeled in time to see the jail going skyward in a pillar of flame, and glass cracked and rattled all over Belplain.

"Great Caesar! the powder has bu'st, after all!" the sheriff exclaimed. "I'll bet a dollar Bretby has gone up like a rocket in the ruin."

He was turning back when the detective spoke sharply:

"Let Bretby go. I cautioned him to look out for the fire, and if he has neglected my warning we can't help him now. The explosion will call out every one here—get half a dozen stout fellows and let us get off after Brennan."

The detective was moving toward where he had horses, and such small matters as the blowing up of a jail could not stop him. He took the lead by virtue of superiority of brain, and the sheriff again fell into line. He said he would get the men, and he soon had enough to choose from, for the explosion brought out all the people of the village.

Quicker than might be expected, the pursuing party was ready, though the men upon whom the sheriff had seized showed far more interest in the ruins of the jail than in the escaped wrecker. Braceridge, however, brought all into the traces in his usually convincing way, and the party galloped off, the detective leading due west, though why he chose that course without argument or investigation the sheriff could not tell.

He rode beside his leader as they clattered away.

"It's a hopeless case, ain't it?" he asked.

"Why so?"

"Barb Brennan ain't easily caught."

"He's easily lost," said Braceridge, curtly.

"I'm sorry it happened so," meekly observed the sheriff.

"I don't doubt it, and we won't cry now the milk is spilled. Let it go. We'll have Barb if we can, if not, we'll take some one else."

"Some one else? Who?"

"Did you recognize any of that party?"

"No."

"I did" said the detective, coolly, "and I'll make it lively for the man to whom I refer. You can bet high on that. It seems probable that Brennan is out of our grip, for he is a most confounded slippery customer, but the other man will not run, and he shall get the full benefit of the law."

"Who is it?" curiously asked the officer.

"I'll tell you when I swear out a warrant for his arrest."

By this time they were well beyond the village, and as the road soon branched all were curious to know which course the detective would take. He was either going by instinct or hap-hazard, and they could not see much sense in tearing along in response to a call from either. But the cool-headed leader did not waver.

They were nearing the fork when they met a man, who seemed to be an old farmer, jogging slowly toward the village on an ancient horse. Braceridge reined in his horse promptly.

"Have you met any horsemen lately?" he asked.

"Wal, no; I hain't met any; but jest afore I reached ther forks by ther south road, thar war severial chaps went a-tearing along ther north road like mad."

"Could you see them?"

"No. Only heard them."

"Who are you?"

"Ole Willum Witzky."

"Where do you live?"

"Nowhar in partic'ler—"

"Do you know him, sheriff?"

"No."

"Robbins, take the man into town and lock him up."

"Wh-wh-what fur?" stammered Ole Willum, and the sheriff mentally echoed the question. What could Braceridge want of such a dilapidated old fellow?

But the detective bent forward until his face was within two feet of Mr. Witzky's and coolly replied:

"Because you are Meg Brennan!"

The old man, or what seemed to be one, started abruptly and then, pulling sharply at the rein, tried to escape from the group. Braceridge, however, struck his own horse, surged to the other's side and caught the horse's rein.

"Useless, Mrs. Brennan," he tersely said.

"Ah! No, I really wouldn't!"

The desperate woman had jerked a revolver from beneath her ragged coat, and its muzzle was turned upon the detective. She had never shed human blood, but she had the will then to remove the worst enemy her husband had. But David Braceridge would have been dead years before had he been one to fall before ordinary attacks.

He caught the revolver before it could be discharged.

"No," he said, not a trace of vindictiveness in his voice. "I am not prepared to go that way. Why are you here, and in such a disguise?"

"That is my business," was the sullen reply.

"You are wrong—it is mine, for I easily guess the meaning of the riddle. You were sent here to send us astray. You indirectly told us that Barb Brennan had taken the north road. We shall follow the south road and try and capture him. Robbins, take the woman to the town and lock her up."

Meg did not answer a word; she saw that her plan had failed. For herself, and the captivity which seemed fated to follow, she cared nothing; but she saw that the detective's keenness had made her attempt—undertaken as a part of the scheme to rescue Barb, and not of her own forming—worse than useless, and Barb's capture possible.

Robbins turned back to Belplain with her, while the other men clattered on in pursuit of the wrecker.

CHAPTER XIV.

BRACERIDGE WINS A POINT IN THE GAME.

BELPLAIN had never before seen a day of such excitement as that which followed the night just described. The jail lay in ruins; the temple of justice, into which had gone the hard-earned dollars of the plain people, was now not worth a cent; and it was supposed that the remains of the sheriff's assistants were scattered around the town somewhere. He was never seen after the explosion.

And Barb Brennan was gone—the man upon whose capture they had expended so much time, labor and money, and whose capture, when accomplished, had given them so much pleasure, had slipped through their fingers despite all their precautions to hold him.

It was a night of escapes, for, when Braceridge led his unsuccessful party back after pursuing the wrecker, and called on Robbins to

produce Meg Brennan, the man confessed, with a mixture of shame and fear, that he could not produce her; that she had escaped from him before Belplain was reached.

There were some there who had thought Braceridge would strike down so incompetent an assistant, but, watching the detective keenly, they were unable to see that the news affected him in the least. His strong face gave no sign, but turning to the sheriff he said, in an even voice:

"If I were you, sir, I would arrest a man who lacked the 'sand' to conduct a woman prisoner a distance of two miles."

The sheriff agreed that the idea was a proper one, and Robbins was locked up accordingly. There were many who believed that if the woman had been held she could have been induced to lead the way to Black Barb. Braceridge, having a pretty clear idea of her nature, did not echo the words. Meg would never betray her husband, but where the detective could not otherwise make people useful, he had a way of outwitting them when they least expected it.

But if Barb and Meg were beyond his reach, there was one person who was not, and he called on the sheriff to arrest a certain person, at the mention of whose name that official got dumfounded.

He had not fully recovered when two visitors arrived at the office—Judge Westcourt and Dane Templeton.

"We have come down to see if we can help you, Mr. Braceridge," said the judge, more cordially than usual.

"Help me?" slowly questioned Braceridge.

"Yes—to catch Brennan, or any part of his diabolical crew. Ye gods! that jail was the pet and pride of all Belplain, and now it and a pretty pile of dollars have gone up in thin flame. Catch the demons once more, Braceridge, and we'll try and hang them, all within the same day!"

The detective had leaned back in his chair, and was looking at the visitors with a face that gave no clew to his thoughts.

"Have you any suggestions to offer?" he quietly asked.

"Well, no. We haven't the matter down fine. Our only advice is for you to take the scent and run the game down, hit or miss."

"Not possessing acute nostrils, we can hardly make the scent of use to us; besides, both it and the trail are lost at the river, where Brennan and his gang took the precaution to double and twist a bit."

"And so got well off?"

"Yes."

"Bracebridge, capture that fellow, and I'll give you a thousand dollars."

"Never mind; your offer is but a drop in the bucket compared with the rewards already out. If you really want to help me, just suggest where you think your hopeful brother-in-law is likely to have gone."

"Do not call him a relative of mine!" exclaimed the judge. "I refuse to acknowledge him. As to where he is, you know far more about his resorts than I. I only hope you will run him down."

"Perhaps Mr. Templeton can give us a suggestion," continued the detective, politely.

"I, sir?" echoed Dane, in surprise.

"Yes."

"I have no knowledge on the subject at all. From what I have heard of Brennan, I should say he is likely to turn up next anywhere from the Rio Grande to Fargo. Where his resorts are, I do not know."

"Why, I thought he and you were old friends," said the detective, with a coolness which made the sheriff writhe in his chair.

"I have clearly proven that the charge that I ever associated with his band was a base libel!" Dane somewhat hotly returned.

"Certainly," added Westcourt. "Mr. Templeton is of an old Southern family; a rich and honorable one; and as he was thousands of miles away at the time 'Cain Magruder' flourished, it follows that the two cannot be one."

"Very strange," observed Braceridge.

"What is strange?"

"That I am obliged to arrest such an exemplary young man."

His cool, even voice struck dismay to Dane Templeton's guilty heart, but Westcourt's face grew as belligerent as when he was bullying some chicken-thief in court.

"Arrest whom?" he demanded, in a tone like a small cyclone.

"Mr. Templeton."

"Why should you arrest him?"

"As one of the men who raided the jail!"

"It is false!" cried Dane, hotly; "I had nothing to do with the matter. What iniquitous scheme have you afoot now?"

"It strikes me the iniquity came in when the jail was raided," replied Braceridge, wholly unmoved. "You should have thought of it then."

"Sir," cried the judge, "Templeton was not there."

"Was he at your house?"

"No," reluctantly admitted Westcourt, "but—"

"It is nobody's business where I was," savagely interrupted Dane.

"We shall see. I am prepared to swear that I recognized your voice among the jail-breakers. I was temporarily stunned by a blow from a sand-bag, but I recovered sooner than any of you thought, and I took notice of all around me. Meg Brennan brought about the capture of her husband by unmasking you when you would have married Miriam Westcourt—a sacrifice she only made to save a deceived girl from uniting her fortunes with those of an ex-wrecker—and if I had any call to arrest Cain Magruder I should have taken you in at once. I had none, but for the men who wrested Barb Brennan from the hands of law, I have a call to make arrests. You are the only man I know, and I declare you to be my prisoner."

"Beware!" exclaimed Westcourt. "He is of an old Georgia family and my daughter's future husband; you strike at me when you strike at him."

"Sir," replied Braceridge, coldly, "your language ill becomes an officer of law."

"I'll attend to this," said Templeton, a new gleam in his eyes. "I refuse to submit to persecution!"

He sprung to his feet and started for the door, but, with a quick, serpentine motion, the detective left his chair and blocked the way.

"Stop!" he said, firmly. "You are my prisoner, and you shall not escape."

Dane Templeton's face was pale, but it expressed a dogged resolution, and he jerked a revolver from his pocket and, cocking it as it arose, presented it at Braceridge's breast. He intended to shoot down the man who was so dangerous to him, giving no further warning, but his finger did not press the trigger.

The detective had been the hero of many a hard fight, and he flung himself forward like a flash; his hand grasped the revolver and it was wrested away in a twinkling. Such a remarkable move absolutely dumfounded even the man who had ridden with Black Barb.

"Useless!" observed Braceridge. "There have been too many prisoners lost already at Belplain; what I have now, I hold!"

Dane tried his strength, but it was nothing compared with that of his captor. He desisted, and stood scowling at him blackly. Westcourt retained his seat, his face dark with anger. He dared not actually array himself against the law, but he would not have been sorry had Templeton succeeded in executing his murderous intention.

He did raise his voice, however, and with a mixture of anger and argument tried to convince Braceridge he was mistaken. The judge was sincere. With the welfare of Miriam at heart, he had looked over Templeton's papers a second time and satisfied himself that the young man was all he claimed to be, and a suitable party to become his daughter's husband. Therefore, his present indignation was that of a man of hot temper and pride, who believes he sees a friend wronged.

He had engineered the attack on the jail, to keep his promise to Meg Brennan, but he knew only one man who had participated in the affair and had no reason to believe Dane was one of them. In fact, he regarded the accusation as ridiculous.

Braceridge, however, was firm. When he recovered his senses in the jail, after being knocked down with the sand-bag, he wisely concealed the fact that consciousness had returned, and tried to identify the masked men. He heard a voice which he was prepared to swear was Templeton's, and now he intended to make him pay the penalty.

He soon found that he had waded into deep water. Judge Westcourt held Belplain in his vest-pocket, and every one was shocked that the detective should arrest him who was to be the judge's son-in-law.

Even the sheriff lost his "sand," and became a timid, vacillating fellow who was worse than a post. He dared not anger either Westcourt or the powers represented by David Braceridge, and in endeavoring to assume a course which would clear his skirts in any case, he became absurd and disgusting.

But the detective remained cool and self-reliant in the midst of all, and as two of his own men came in, he placed them over Templeton, who was confined in a temporary prison, and prepared for vigorous measures.

He intended that Templeton should tell all he knew about the whereabouts of Barb Brennan.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS WESTCOURT SPEAKS PLAINLY.

BRACERIDGE and one of his men were located in a room in the house where Templeton was confined. The third detective was in the adjoining room with the prisoner. David had just had a long but useless talk with the fellow, and, coming out, had lit his pipe and was calmly smoking.

"So it was no go?" inquired Bixby, after a pause.

"No go," tersely replied Braceridge.

"He wouldn't admit anything?"

"Not a thing. He denies that he was concerned in the jail-breaking; denies that he was

ever called Cain Magruder; and that he ever affiliated in any way with Barb Brennan."

"But you didn't believe him?"

"I lacked the capacity. I know he was in the jail-break, and there is no reason to doubt that Meg Brennan spoke the truth when she said he was once with her husband's band. What would she have betrayed Barb from any trifling motive? Well, I think not. She was resolved to save Miriam Westcourt from marrying a scoundrel, and she did at least delay the marriage. I suspect Cain Magruder will not be in condition to marry for a few years to come."

"Your interview was a hot one."

"On his part, yes. He made his assertions of innocence with a roar, as though he believed volume of sound would convince me. I offered him official consideration if he would tell all he knew. He rejected the spar flung into the troubled sea for his benefit, and now he may swim on his own merits."

"What are we to do next?"

"Either you or Goldsmith must stay with Templeton, wherever he is—I shall probably take him away from here within twenty-four hours—until a telegram I have sent is answered, I want a man who knew the real Templeton, in Georgia, to come out and see if this is the genuine person. As for me, I shall set off on Brennan's trail again as soon as Whipple and the other men report."

"It's war to the knife, I see."

"It's war to Barb Brennan, anyhow," was the grim reply.

"We might still have him only for these local idiots."

"They are stupid, but I wish they were no worse. I suspect, Bixby, that Westcourt was concerned in the rescue of Brennan."

"The dickens! Why so?"

"Trifles light as air, I can hardly explain, but the idea is strong within me. Judge, or no judge, Westcourt is no angel, and I'll have him out of his hole."

"Good for you!" said Bixby, who stoutly believed that when his superior said he would do a thing, it was going to be done unless Pike's Peak fell over and crushed the scheme.

Just then a man entered to say that a visitor wished to see Braceridge.

"Is it the sheriff?"

"No. It is Miss Westcourt."

For a moment the detective's placid face was ruffled; then he calmly laid down his pipe and arose.

"I will see her," he replied.

He passed out of the room and was conducted to another. His guide left him at the door. He entered, and saw the judge's daughter standing in the middle of the room. She had made no effort to secure comfort, but, facing the detective, she looked like a tragedy queen about to be photographed as Lady Macbeth, or some other celebrated character.

She had never looked more beautiful. She was angry, and anger had sent an additional flush into her face. She was a superb-looking woman.

Braceridge was a cool, level-headed man of business, but there is usually water under the thickest ice. The detective was only human, and he had not looked on Miriam with indifference. When he first met her, he had mentally acknowledged that Templeton was a lucky man to win her; now, he thought he would himself be a lucky man could he win her.

All this, however, had been in his usual steady way, and he had no idea of falling down on his knees and making a spectacle of himself. No; he expected to carry his secret to the grave, and be none the worse for the carrying. He had heard of broken hearts, but he was inclined to believe such fractures were more common to the mind than the organ. A well-regulated heart is generally too busy to get broken on Cupid's wheel.

Braceridge bowed, but his politeness was lost on Miss Westcourt.

"How dare you face me, sir?" she cried, angrily.

Even Braceridge was surprised at so warm a reception.

"Heaven bless us!" he replied, "I was told that you desired to see me."

"I sent word to that effect, but I did not suppose you would have the audacity to come," she continued, her voice still vibrating with the old emotion.

"Being summoned, I naturally supposed I was wanted. If you desire, I will withdraw."

"The detective had fully grasped the situation, and was again his old, cool self.

"You shall not withdraw until you have heard what I have to say. You have eaten the bread of our house, and now you turn upon us like a viper."

Hard words for a man to hear from the woman for whom he had a fancy; but, whatever the detective felt, his expression did not betray that he was either pained or disturbed.

"I suppose you refer to Dane Templeton's case?" he steadily replied.

"I do, sir—to the gentleman you have so cruelly used."

"He is unpleasantly situated, I admit; but you must remember that the law is no respecter

of persons. All men are subject to it in this country, and if they violate it, they have only themselves to blame for their downfall."

"Dane Templeton has violated no law, sir!" retorted Miriam, her eyes flashing.

Braceridge hesitated, and then pacifically replied:

"Miss Westcourt, please be seated, and let us talk quietly concerning the matter."

"Quietly! You can talk quietly, because you are not confined in prison under an odious charge."

"This is very embarrassing," admitted the detective, though he did not appear particularly discomposed. "Would it not be well for us to speak more temperately?"

An angry retort seemed trembling on her lips, but she checked it, and took the seat she had before scorned.

"I will hear you," she said, frigidly.

"First of all, let me say that I am grieved that my official duty has made it necessary for me to molest one whom Miss Westcourt regards highly," said Braceridge, with such grave courtesy that she could not interrupt intemperately, "but when one becomes a detective, he is thereafter obliged to consider duty first of all. He is the servant of the public. When I arrested Dane Templeton, I did not proceed from any personal motive. Knowing as I did that he was concerned in the rescue of Barb Brennan, I should have been false to my profession and to honor had I failed to arrest him."

"You insist that he was one of the rescuers?"

"I do, Miss Westcourt."

"On what evidence?"

"I recognized his voice."

"Have you never heard two voices that were alike?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you know the voice you heard was Dane's?"

"Suppose I were to mask my face, and then sit here and talk with you. Would you know me, or would you not? I have said I recognized Templeton's voice. There were other points—his form, height, hands, color of hair, general movement and shape of foot. When I had heard the voice, I looked to all these things and, lo! Dane Templeton was there. I knew him as well as though the mask was off his face."

The argument was made in a manner which would have staggered an ordinary person, and even Miriam was disturbed. She did not answer for a moment, and the detective added:

"It is unpleasant for me to sit here and argue against Mr. Templeton, but, in considering whether he is really an honorable gentleman, I must ask you to remember the charge Meg Brennan made against him. Brennan and his wife were in hiding, and secreted where I verily believe we should never have found them. Meg loves her husband sincerely in spite of his misdemeanors, and she would die for him at any time if need be. Yet, rather than see you marry Templeton, she appeared and told who he really was, thereby betraying her husband into our hands. Only her regard for your happiness—a womanly regard for her niece—tempted her to make that great sacrifice."

"It was a case of mistaken identity; Mr. Templeton is not Cain Magruder."

Braceridge did not reply.

"But you, sir," cried the girl bitterly, "persecute him as though he were a dozen desperadoes embraced in one. Do detectives take leave of all judgment and honor when they choose their base trade? They seem, at least, to look on all people as rascals, and to be pitiless. And you, sir, have enjoyed the hospitality of my father's house!"

The poor, weak, selfish argument was made as though she had discovered a mighty meanness of which Braceridge had been guilty, and the scorn in her voice brought the slightest possible tinge of heightened color to his face.

But his calmness seemed proof against everything.

"Have you no further business with me?" he quietly asked.

"Yes—no, I have not; as I see the folly of trying to convince you, I will go."

She arose, and Braceridge followed her example.

"I regret this variance of opinion," he said; "and that I am obliged to cause you pain; but I venture to assert that the time will yet come—I am not now speaking of Mr. Templeton's case—when you will acknowledge that an honorable detective must do his work at all hazards."

She did not reply, but completing her preparations for going, bade him a cold "Good-day," and took her departure.

He remained, gnawing fiercely at his mustache, and looking anything but pleased. Pleased? The woman he loved under adverse circumstances had subjected him to the most painful interview of his life. A lash will cut the toughest hide, and under his cool exterior Braceridge was as sensitive as any man. He had nothing to be pleased about, and he was not pleased.

He was speedily aroused by the entrance of a small, keen-eyed man, who came in with a cat-like step and then bowed to the detective.

"Mr. Braceridge, I think?"

"That's my name, sir."

"Mine is Pixton, and I am one of the force. I am sent by Colonel McShorter, and here are my letters."

CHAPTER XVI.

PIXTON PROVES HIS ABILITY.

THE little man extended the papers, and Braceridge took both them and the bearer's hand. He had heard of Jos Pixton often, and knew him to be one of the sharpest men in the West. As a detective he had scored marked success further north. Having no professional jealousy, Dave was glad to secure such an ally.

He sat down and read the letters in Colonel McShorter's well-known writing, which duly introduced Pixton, and then put them in his pocket.

"I am glad to get your help, Mr. Pixton. I lost my right bower when Barb Brennan shot Buckley, and I trust we may work together as well as Buck and I did."

"Hope we shall, Mr. Braceridge, and get Brennan as well."

"I am going to have him," replied Braceridge, a stubborn look on his face. "I have a prisoner here who knows something about him, and from whom I am trying to get a confession. Should he continue obstinate another day I shall leave him and go for Barb by the way. Cole, Gray and Schimberly are at work, and I expect their reports at any moment. When they are in, it's move on with me, and I shall have Brennan if I follow him for years."

"By George! you have grit such as I admire. My motto is, 'Let the burr stick while there's a particle of wool left,' and you exemplify it. We'll have him, my boy—sure!"

Pixton was plainly of a more enthusiastic nature than his companion, but the annals of the West showed that he was no vain boaster. Detectives and law-breakers alike knew him well; the one class favorably, the other to their cost.

When the two men finally arose, Braceridge spoke of going, and Pixton asked who was with Templeton.

"Ricketts."

"Don't know him, but if you'll introduce us, I shall."

So Braceridge took him in, and the introduction was duly made. Pixton looked closely at the prisoner.

"One of the fine-feathered sort, I see," he observed.

"Men get rich who train with Barb Brennan," replied Ricketts.

Dane Templeton scowled. He would have been pleased to shoot these limbs of the law, one and all, but he was lamentably helpless. He had sulked most of the time since he was shut up. He cursed the day when Braceridge came to Belplain. Only for him he might have married a rich man's daughter and, very likely, have lived forever in clover.

He looked at David in a ferocious manner, but the latter had seen ugly prisoners before and it made no impression. He soon went out. Pixton remained with Ricketts and talked pleasantly. He seemed to have satisfied his curiosity in regard to Templeton, and had turned his back upon him.

Shortly after, however, a man called to see Braceridge, and as the latter was out, Ricketts went to see him. Then the little man with the keen eyes turned quickly upon Templeton, his face sharper and more crafty than ever.

"Keep cool!" he exclaimed. "Speak low, and don't give anything away, but I'm here to save you. I am from your friends, but it's a bold game. Braceridge thinks me a detective, but one word or look may arouse his suspicions. Carefully, Templeton, carefully!"

"Cut my bonds!" said Dane, eagerly.

"No. The time has not come."

"Fool! Delay may be fatal."

"Haste will be fatal."

"But I am dying of suspense here."

"Rubbish, man! Keep cool. If you have no nerve, I don't know as I care to save you. Brace up, I say. There! we must not talk more. Govern your face and don't let hope glow there and give the game away. Act sullen, as before. Hark! I hear Ricketts coming. Yes, Mister Cain Magruder, some rascals play around on a long line and have a right nice racket, but they get pulled in sooner or later, and some of them get pulled up. Eh, Mr. Ricketts?"

All the last few remarks had been for the benefit of Ricketts, who had re-entered the room, and that worthy man did not for a moment suspect that anything was wrong.

Templeton turned his face partly away, so that he would not betray anything. He had gone from gloom to hope at one bound. It might be he would never succeed in winning Miriam Westcourt, but it would be a great point won if he could secure his liberty. Once that was accomplished, he would get away from Belplain and David Braceridge as soon as possible. He gnawed his teeth as he thought of the last man. He seemed to be the evil genius of his life; he wished he could remove him, but he began to realize just what a task that would be.

David soon returned, and he and Pixton be-

gan talking as before. The former was unusually pleasant and jovial, and he kept his companion in the best of temper.

"By the way," he finally said, "when did you see Colonel McShorter last?"

"On the 10th."

"Where?"

"Why, at Lincoln. Didn't you notice his letters were from that point?"

"I believe I did, now you speak of it. What was he doing?"

"Oh! attending to official business. I was with him but a short time, as he was very busy. He had several jobs under way and several detectives around to whom he was giving directions."

"I see. By the way, what has become of the scar on your hand made in the fight with Denver John?"

Pixton started.

"The scar?" he repeated, looking at his hand, which bore no such ornament.

"Yes."

"There isn't any there."

"So I see; yet, Denver John gashed you there so you were said to be marked for life."

Pixton tried to smile carelessly.

"In these days, scars don't amount to much. Skillful specialists get rid of them easily. I encountered a man in Denver who relieved me of mine, so it is as good as new."

He explained fluently, but he had concealed the hand under the table.

"It won't work, Mr. Pixton," replied Braceridge, coolly. "Such a gash as the one to which I referred can never be removed, and the inference is easy—you are not Detective Pixton!"

The charge was quietly made, but as Pixton looked into the square, resolute face before him he felt that his own face betrayed the consternation he felt. Still, he rallied somewhat.

"Why, confound it! are you mad, Braceridge?"

"No, nor blind. Your little game took me in at first, for I knew McShorter's papers were genuine, but I now see that they were stolen by you. Recollection of your scar, which is not yours, but of which I have heard, first set me to thinking, and I have been busy since. I am now sure you are not Pixton. When I questioned you about McShorter's whereabouts, I trapped you. He was not at Lincoln, the 10th; he was at Cheyenne. The colonel, however, always dates official papers from Lincoln. Come, now, my man, what's your game?"

The spy looked at Braceridge in mute dismay. He was learning at last just how keen was this man he had tried to deceive, and the knowledge that he had got himself into such a scrape took away all his nerve.

"Who sent you?" added David, more sharply.

"It—it was a joke," muttered the man.

"Rubbish! You can't deceive me. Are you here to rescue Dane Templeton?"

The other man had possessed the reputation of being a person of "sand," but he did not prove it now.

"Yes," he desperately confessed.

"Sent by whom?"

"Barb Brennan's friends, I suppose. I don't know as Barb was in it, but those who sent me knew Barb."

"Did you come for any other purpose than to see Templeton?" pursued Braceridge, as evenly as before.

"No."

"Where is Brennan?"

"Making for the Gunnison; I think he means to lay low in the Sangre de Cristo."

That was all he knew; careful questioning convinced David of that fact. The man said his name was Moss, and that he was acquainted with people who knew Brennan, though he had never worked with or for the train-wrecker. The band, however, had captured the genuine Pixton, and his papers were taken from him, and Moss came to Belplain to rescue Templeton.

Braceridge had made an important stride toward success. He locked up Mr. Moss, and then preparations were made for departure the following morning. The prisoners were to be taken to the county jail, and then Braceridge and his force would set their faces toward the Gunnison and again try their luck against Barb Brennan.

He made no confidences among the Belplain people, for he had lost all confidence in them. They were not lawless, nor inclined to admire law-breakers, but Judge Westcourt held the town in his pocket, and when he set the cue they followed, unless the example was too rank. Still, the detectives' movements answered for themselves, and it was soon generally known that they were about to leave.

Their present landlady served them a fine supper, of which coffee formed an important part. Having eaten, they sat down to smoke; one in Templeton's room, the others in the main room.

How it happened Braceridge never really knew, but he grew sleepy and things about him became indistinct; and then, without an effort on his part to prevent it, he fell asleep. It was not a natural sleep, for he had floated to it, rather than fallen asleep as was usual, under which circum-

stances he would have guarded against and prevented it.

He slept, and the minutes rolled on. He slept—how long? Consciousness returned at last, and he began to stir. At first his movements were uncertain, and then his hands strayed to his head. He was conscious of a dull, heavy pain there, and a desire for water caused him to stagger to his feet.

Then he saw his companion, sleeping and breathing heavily, his face unnaturally pale.

A sudden suspicion flashed upon the detective, and he strode to the other room.

The third detective was similarly sleeping, and *Dane Templeton was gone!*

Braceridge stood dumfounded for a moment. He knew they had all been drugged; that it had been done to rescue the prisoner, and that the plot had succeeded to a charm. Dane Templeton had slipped through their fingers as previous prisoners had done. Keen professional dismay seized Braceridge, but above all arose a desire for revenge. He had been drugged, and it seemed that the landlady was in the plot. He would soon know.

For the second time he shook his assistants, but, getting only stupid mutterings from them, which proved that they were drugged, he strode into the kitchen. The hour was late and all the people of the house were abed, but he soon aroused them.

His revelation astounded and dismayed them; that was clear; and the honest woman energetically denied that she had put improper ingredients in their food.

"Who else could have done it?" Braceridge demanded.

"Miriam Westcourt made the coffee, but—"

"She did!" David interrupted. "How did that happen?"

"She dropped in to inquire after Templeton, and then said she would make the coffee to help me. But, of course she would not have done anything wrong."

"Of course she has," said Braceridge, bitterly; "that is, if it is wrong to drug officers of law and take away prisoners. All is now plain, madame, and you need not explain further."

He turned away and re-entered the room where slept his drugged assistants. His face had grown pale, and there was an expression around his mouth seldom seen there. It was not easily read, but the fact remained clear that he was moved as men of his cool nature seldom are moved.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CRASH ON THE OVERLAND.

ONCE more we visit the Central Pacific. Once more we see a train gliding along the rails; shooting across a plain here like a sleuth hound on the trail; flitting through a rocky cut there like a black phantom; and leaving behind it a line of smoke like the trail of a comet.

John Loring is the conductor, and to him comes a stout man in coarse, slouchy clothes who looks like a well-to-do but ultra-fashionable cattle-king.

"Anything new, Braceridge?" asked Loring, in a low voice.

"Rather," replied the supposed cattle man. "I have found two of the parties I want."

"Good enough! Who are they?"

"Cain Magruder and Miriam Westcourt."

"Running away?"

"Going away—I can't answer to the running part—in disguise. I am not surprised. When I found that the girl had left Belplain without her father, I expected to find that she had gone with that precious scamp, Magruder."

There was a bitter accent to the disguised detective's voice, for he still cared enough for the judge's daughter so that he felt that what had happened was a personal wrong to him as well as a blow at the majesty of the law.

"Do you suppose they are married?"

"Either that, or they soon will be. Miss Westcourt has made a terrible blunder, and is a willful woman, but she is not wholly mad. Very likely they are married."

"Shall you arrest them?" Loring asked.

"I shall arrest Magruder. With Miss Westcourt I have nothing to do. It is strange that she will let her infatuation for that scamp lead her to such an end. She is following in the tracks of poor Meg Brennan; it seems that the Westcourt women are all alike. Templeton has been the means of breaking up the family at Belplain. Here he is fleeing with Miriam, and the complications he wrought have forced the judge to conceal himself somewhere."

"Why did he leave Belplain? He wasn't concerned in Templeton's rescue."

"How about Brennan's? I have satisfied myself that he was at the bottom of that, and have arrested all his tools except Magruder. It seems the judge let the job out to one Stevens, and the latter, in choosing his assistants, roped in Magruder. The moment Westcourt knew I had arrested Stevens, he vanished from Belplain. Another idol is shattered."

"I had a theory that he went solely because of another matter," said Loring, thoughtfully. "You know that foolish little girl of mine, Rose Thomas, is anxious to have the lordly Westcourt for a father. Old Aaron pushed him hard, but the judge has all the sharpness of rascality,

and he bamboozled Aaron to the bent of his will. Now, he has skipped, and the pa part is below par—for which I'm not sorry. I don't want Rose to have such an old rooster as Westcourt for even a coachman."

In the meanwhile, Dane Templeton and Miriam were in another car, unconscious of the danger hovering over them. A fairly skillful disguise had made him look like a portly man of middle age, while Miriam wore a black dress and gray hair, and kept her veil down.

While the preceding conversation was taking place, they were also talking.

"I shall be glad when our journey is over," sighed the girl.

"You are getting very weary," said Dane, with due solicitude.

"I confess that I am."

"Well, our journey will soon be over, and then we will first visit a minister and then seek needed rest. The next few weeks shall be thoroughly quiet."

"Unless Braceridge finds us."

"Bloodhound that he is, he is not a supernatural being. I feel sure we have thrown him off the track, and in some quiet town we will settle down and bid farewell to the outside world for a time."

"I almost wish we had told father where we were going."

"Never mind; I will find a safe way of letting him know," replied Templeton, who did not care to explain that, though he had secured the judge's confidence, he wished to have the marriage ceremony irrevocably performed first of all.

The train glided on, and the day faded and night fell. Twilight in a railway car is a gloomy hour, and darkness on the plains is but little better. In a settled district there is a pleasure in watching the flashing lights by the way as the train thunders along, but where one sees nothing but gloomy blackness for mile after mile, unpleasant thoughts and ideas are likely to arise.

So with Miriam, and she grew positively nervous as she looked from the window. For the first time she fully realized what she was doing. She had forsaken home, friends, father, all, for a man who was accused of grave crimes.

But she turned toward Templeton and, looking at him, her faith grew strong again. It is at once woman's greatest blessing and her greatest curse that she will believe where a man would doubt; and when she links her fortunes with a man of dubious character, the curse usually falls with fatal force.

At the rear of the car Braceridge sat and looked at them. His face told no tales, but he was far from being happy. Miriam's love for Magruder nettled him more and more, and he felt that her salvation depended upon him. Templeton must be arrested and his power over her broken. But it was not in a spirit of revenge he so argued.

The train swept on through the darkness. Night lay heavily over the plain. The engine seemed to cut a road through a solid substance.

John Loring was one of the most wide-awake of the Overland conductors. He never neglected his duty when on duty, and it was commonly said he looked after it when awake.

For the present he felt little fear of trouble from train-wreckers or other lawless characters. Barb Brennan was at liberty, but it was not believed he would gather another band before spring, and the scattering of the old one had been a warning to fellows of his character.

Still on went the train. Hickhack Gap was being rapidly neared, a cut between banks where the train wound around a moderate curve. But Hickhack Gap possessed no particular interest to any of the train-men. They had often been through it before.

The gray-headed engineer let his locomotive take the curve at her former speed. It was gradual, the rails were good, and the train was not running fast anyway.

Through the cut went the swaying line of cars and then the engine shot out on the further side, as though anxious to breathe the open air of the level beyond. But it saw not the pitfall laid for its unwary feet.

There was a thud—a crash—a rending sound—a rattling as though a thousand muskets were firing irregularly—the people on the train were flung in all directions, and then—the wreck.

The engine lay at one side, bent and twisted from its old shape, and the cars—where were they? Some were one side up and some another, while the foremost had neither size nor shape, except as regarded kindling-wood.

Then followed the usual scene. Men and women were dead and dying, and others were trying to extricate themselves from strange and confusing scenes. Some were breaking windows to get out, and all were conscious that they were in the midst of that terrible event—a railroad smash-up.

John Loring had turned over irregularly several times when the crash came, but he was unhurt, and soon realized that the car in which he was, was exactly wrong side up. He was near the door, and he soon succeeded in getting out.

The bonnet of the car had become the platform, and as he stepped out he was met by a man of whom he could tell nothing in the darkness. But the man at once seized him, and he felt the cold touch of a revolver against his face.

"Surrender, or you're a dead man!" cried the unknown.

It was enough. Loring knew what he had suspected before. The accident was due to the train-wreckers.

He hesitated not for a moment. Striking out with full force, he knocked the man away with such a tremendous blow that he disappeared from view as though fired from a cannon.

Then Loring sprung clear of the car.

Sparks and coals from the engine had fallen upon the ruins of the foremost car, and these had caught with that surprising quickness common to fires which ought not to catch.

By the light the conductor saw many men about him. He had drawn a revolver, but he hesitated to use it. How was he to know who were wreckers, and who honest men?

A hand touched his shoulder. He wheeled, but a cool voice spoke reassuringly.

"It is I—Braceridge. Be of good cheer. We must open upon those fellows, or incalculable damage will follow. Are your sixes ready?"

"All ready, but we may hit the wrong men."

"No fear; we are the first of the train people out. Are you ready with the sixes?"

"Yes."

"Then blaze away!"

If Loring had had any hesitation, it vanished at that moment. A cry arose from among the dark figures before them.

"There's two on 'em. Shoot them down!"

A bullet whistled past Loring's head, while almost at the same moment he saw a herculean figure wave a hand on high.

"Shoot ev'ry critter that comes from the train. Make a clean sweep on't!"

The speaker was Barb Brennan—ay, there was no mistaking him for any other man, and it was clear they were beset by the scourge of the Overland.

Braceridge opened fire briskly, and Loring followed suit. A shower of lead went sweeping in among the wreckers, awaking a chorus of yells and curses.

"Keep it up!" coolly directed the detective. "It's our only hope. No quarter can be expected, and the train shall not be sacked if I can help it."

And still his revolvers played upon the outlaws.

But Barb Brennan, seeing his men thus falling, became almost a veritable demon in a moment. He shouted to his men, and they rallied at the magic of his voice, as they always did, and then, led by the swart chief, came sweeping down upon the two unassisted men in a body.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEFENSE OF THE TRAIN.

By this time other passengers and train-men began to get out. Among the first were Dane Templeton and Miriam. He had shown commendable coolness from the first, and had succeeded in breaking a window, sash and all, and getting her safely from the car. Safely? Not in one sense of the word, for she had been injured by the shock of the collision, and when they were fairly away she found herself so near fainting that she could not stand.

She was nervously excited, and bitterly bemoaned her misfortunes, even to the extent of criticising Templeton for taking her away from Belplain, but that man answered somewhat incoherently.

He looked often toward the fighting men, and was almost as nervous as she.

He had heard a cool, steady voice giving directions in a way which was very familiar. He recognized the voice; he knew that, despite all his precautions, Braceridge was near him, and he was shrewd enough to suspect that the detective knew he had been on the train.

The fellow's blood seemed to chill. He could face an ordinary danger well enough—he had just shown that; but he had conceived a terrible, crawling, uncanny fear of David Braceridge.

So, though he answered Miriam, it was not coherently, and the impression began to dawn upon him that his own life and safety were the most precious things in the world. As well as he was disguised, he feared that the detective's keen gaze would detect the cheat when he saw him, and he was not sure but that his disguise was disarranged.

Consequently, he actually began to consider the advisability of deserting Miriam. She seemed to be so badly injured that medical aid would be required, and if he remained near her this would bring him into a prominence he did not covet. At the same time, he felt that it would be a cowardly act to desert the woman who had forsaken everything for him, and he was almost as nervous as she.

While he hesitated, matters were working in a warm way nearer the train.

Brennan's rush would certainly have succeeded had not other train-men and passengers opportunely come to the aid of Braceridge and Loring. As it was, the rush was repulsed, and

the wreckers fell back and began a fusilade at a distance.

For awhile fighting was desultory, for neither party had confidence enough to force matters. The burning car made a bonfire which lighted up the space between the hostiles, and likewise threw a sort of lurid grimness upon the scene.

But Braceridge was not the man to long remain inactive. He knew that only the bold stand they had taken had saved the train from being plundered at once, and that Barb Brennan was not the person to long lurk in the background and do nothing.

If he dared not charge, he would soon think of some scheme by which he could secure an advantage.

Such being the case, the detective resolved to move first.

"Loring," he said, coolly, "we must get them out of that."

"How can we do it?"

"Can you suggest a way?"

"No."

"Then I must. There's but one way—to charge."

"The dickens! They'll pick us off when we cross the belt of light. Still, if you say so, I'm for it, and—"

"Wait! We must make a detour and get at those fellows on their flank. See?"

Loring did see, and he promptly approved of the plan. So did the other train-men, and such of the passengers as had no women with them. Those who had were reluctant to desert the cars where the women were still secreted.

Braceridge soon settled that part. Those upon whom women relied for protection were to remain where they were, while the others made the charge. By this division he secured the best of the lot, for the unencumbered men were train-hands and cowboys, or miners—a lot who were as ready to fight as to play.

Leaving the train at the rear, they skulked around like wolves until the flank of the wreckers was gained. At this point the light from the burning car only served to make the darkness more intense, and it was not until the outlaws had been located by means of the flashes from their revolvers that the creeping men knew how to strike them.

When they did, Braceridge whispered to Loring and the word ran along the line:

"Ready!"

Each man thus expressed himself, and then the detective waited for no more.

In a keen, penetrating voice, he gave the order to charge, and then the gallant fellows leaped forward like tigers. Each one held his revolvers tightly, and some gripped knives in their teeth; all were in dead earnest.

For a moment their charge was not discovered; then a loud, harsh voice arose above all other sounds; it was Black Barb warning his fellows.

Dark forms arose here and there; the wreckers were at last visible; and as Braceridge knew the importance of having the first blow, he gave the order to fire.

There were a dozen flashes, as though huge lightning-bugs had shot athwart the night, and as many reports rung out with a degree of union which almost made them seem like one. Then the shock came. What that meant, those who have never seen the rough fellows of the West fight can form but a dim idea; holding life as a thing of no importance just then, they sprung at each other like tigers.

It was a wild scene which followed. Struggling men were now and then revealed by revolver flashes, but, otherwise, it was a fight in the dark. The angry voices of men and the sound of blows were to be heard, and in the fullest sense of the word it was give and take.

How long it lasted they never knew, but Braceridge's men suddenly became aware that no foemen were left for them. Such of the wreckers as remained with life and motion left had silently faded away, like the storied Arab, and the rival party stood panting and bleeding.

Braceridge, however, feared that wily Brennan had seized the chance to attack the train afresh, and he led his own men in that direction. There was, however, no sign of the enemy.

"I reckon they have really skipped," said Loring, who was binding up a cut on one hand.

"I'll give a hundred dollars per head if we can get them," said the detective, true to his ruling passion. "Who follows me?"

The cowboys and miners responded as one man, and he knew he would have a good following.

"Can you guard the train?" he asked, of Loring.

"Trust us for that. The fright of the smash-up is over, and there are men enough here to laugh at the wreckers."

"So be it. Then we will look for the scoundrels."

And he led his followers away on the hazardous pursuit.

In the meanwhile, Miriam Westcourt had been left alone. Templeton had made an excuse to visit the train, and minute after minute passed and he did not return. Miriam grew nervous from another cause than that which had first prostrated her, and, rising to her feet, was about to go to the overturned cars and gain the

society of some one when the firing began anew.

She shrunk back and her face grew pallid. Why did not Templeton return? The horror of the night appalled her. Was it for this she had forsaken home and friends? Was her lover going to desert her in the first hour of trial? A wave of bitterness swept over her, and the thought that he might possibly have been shot afforded her no relief. He had left her on a trivial excuse, promising to return at once, but she now remembered his own nervous agitation, and she was shrewd enough to suspect that he feared the investigation which might follow the gathering up of the fragments of the train, and the attention sure to be given her in her present state.

She was, however, rapidly recovering. The Westcourt pride and spirit were aroused, and her suspicions concerning Dane Templeton acted as a medicine.

She was still hesitating when a figure came out of the darkness. At first she thought it was her lover, but closer inspection showed a woman.

"Come to me," she said, impulsively. "We both need company in this crisis."

"Miriam Westcourt!" exclaimed the woman. The girl looked at her sharply.

"I do not know you—" she began, hesitatingly, but she was interrupted.

"I am Meg Brennan. Do you forget so soon? Girl, why are you here, and alone?"

The wrecker's wife stood erect and firm, and her voice had a keen inflection which somehow reminded Miriam of the wife of Rob Roy, but only one idea was then in her mind.

"So you and your husband are at your old work," she said, bitterly. "Great Heaven! is there no limit to your barbarity? Look at this wrecked train! Hear the groans of the wounded, and the shots fired by those you call your friends. Are you a woman, and glory in this night's work?"

"Let us say nothing of that," Meg calmly replied. "I am an outlaw, and an outlaw's wife; little that is good can be expected of me. But you—you—why are you here? Girl, is it possible you have eloped with Dane Templeton?"

Miriam was silent. She remembered Meg's warning, and felt that she had indeed acted rashly.

"Tell me the truth," continued the wrecker's wife.

"I have nothing to tell."

"Your reply is equivalent to a confession. I see all clearly. The mad Westcourt blood knows no such thing as prudence. And yet I have told you what Templeton is. Miriam, I prove my devotion to you by rashly putting my husband in peril. Will you not believe me when I swear that Templeton is really Cain Magruder, a desperado? There can be no mistake; I know him well, and I swear that it is as I say."

"I begin to believe," muttered Miriam.

"Believe wholly, for I tell you he is a man who will ruin your whole life if you follow him. He is no more Dane Templeton that he is Judge Westcourt."

A fresh burst of firing interrupted them, and Meg drew herself erect and looked toward the point of fighting.

"It will soon be over," she said. "The attack has failed, and the wreckers will retreat. Who is it leads the train-men? There has been better generalship than usual, or the result would have been different. Miriam, I leave you here; I have business elsewhere. Before I go, however, let me once more bid you beware of Templeton. If you follow his crooked fortunes, you are ruined. Remember this, and think of your future. Farewell!"

She turned and glided away in the darkness, leaving Miriam alone.

"I begin to believe," murmured the latter, "and I shall not be sorry if Dane does not return. It was a terrible mistake for me to leave my father. I believe I will return, whether Dane reappears or not."

A few days later a Denver paper contained the following item:

"Barb Brennan and his gang have reappeared on the Overland. A train was wrecked near Wittenhill Range last Tuesday, the engine and one car being utterly demolished. The passengers and train-men rallied, however, under the lead of Detective Braceridge, who chanced to be on the train, and the wreckers were driven off. There was a considerable loss of life, concerning which we are able to give no particulars at present, except that Braceridge was among the killed. To-morrow we hope to furnish full particulars."

CHAPTER XIX.

STRAIGHT FLUSH.

AMONG the promising towns of "the Gunnison," Colorado, was, at the time of which we write, one which had received the name of Straight Flush. It had sprung up suddenly, like so many other places in the West, and was chiefly known as a gold-producing town, but there were also slate and iron within its limits, and these facts, combined with others, led people to believe that Straight Flush had a bright future ahead of it.

With Straight Flush as a mining-town, however, we have nothing to do.

The houses of the place were located in a valley between two ridges. The latter were wild, rocky and grim, but the region did not have the high peaks which separate the Gunnison from the eastern half of Colorado. It was, on the whole, low land for the Gunnison, and in the valley which stretched away for miles, a railroad road was being laid.

This was the first thing which impressed a stranger. Standing on an elevated point of land, he could look down the valley and see gangs of men laboring everywhere that the glittering rails were not already in place.

The Straight Flush & Valley Railroad was the pride of the young town.

The largest private residence in Straight Flush was that of Cortlandt King, president of the company. One day toward the close of summer, Mr. King was seated alone in his library, so called, examining a pile of papers. He was a large man, with black hair and a smoothly-shaven face, yet he was no stranger to us.

In Cortlandt King we recognize Judge Westcourt, though razor and hair-dye have changed his appearance considerably since we last saw him at Belplain, a year previous to this day at Straight Flush.

Renowned as he had been at Belplain, his popularity had waned. Even his strongest adherents suspected that he had not "kept to the right" in matters following the appearance of Barb Brennan, and the impression got abroad that he had actually had a hand in the destruction of their beloved jail.

That settled his case with them, and when it was known that he had sold his ranch, no one was sorry.

His own chief idea was to avoid Aaron Thomas and Rose, for he was resolved not to recognize the latter as his daughter; so he changed his name, altered his personal appearance somewhat, and entered upon a new and ambitious career at Straight Flush.

Miriam had rejoined him, and was a sharer of his fresh laurels. She had never seen Dane Templeton nor heard from him since he deserted her at the time of the railroad smash-up. Nor did she care to. His base cowardice on that occasion had thoroughly disenchanted her, and she was only sorry that she had ever known him.

Mr. Cortlandt King was interrupted at his papers by the appearance of his one servant, who announced a caller, and supposing him to be one of the many men with whom his new business brought him in contact, he directed the person, who had sent the name of Peter Grefwilde, to be admitted.

He entered.

The master of the house saw a man who looked as though he might be a minister. He was tall and slender, or had that appearance under his suit of black, with the long, closely-fitting coat and vest cut high in the neck; his face was smooth and pale; blue-glass goggles hid his eyes; and in one hand he carried a book, which might have been of a theological nature.

Plainly, thought the master of the house, a veritable minister had come to Straight Flush.

The stranger removed a tall, rusty black hat.

"Mr. Cortlandt King, I believe," he said, with a briskness which did not seem to be theological.

"That is my name, sir."

"Mine, as I supposed your servant announced, is Peter Grefwilde. I wish, at the outset, to say that I am not here to uselessly monopolize your time. I know what time is to a business man, and I wish to give every man a show. I want a show myself. I am a business man, and I know no voice save that of business."

King had motioned the man to a seat, but he now looked at him with a shade of suspicion. What was the fellow talking about, anyway?

"A very good idea," he said, slowly.

"I shall have business with every prominent man in Straight Flush, and have come to you first of all because you are the one man of them all who is giving Straight Flush the straight tip—that is to say, you are the main-spring of the whole business."

"We will not argue that."

"Certainly not, Mr. King; certainly not. On the contrary, we will come right down to business."

Mr. Grefwilde was making himself as much at home as though he was an old friend. His manner was brisk, good-humored and easy—too easy for King's liking—while his smoothly-flowing voice had a slight twang which led the ex-judge to suspect that he was a product of far "down East."

The caller rattled the leaves of his book, which seemed to be merely a blank one, and plunged ahead.

"I am here, sir, as the representative of the firm of E. B. Eager & Co., of whom you have, of course, heard, as one of the most enterprising publishing firms in the West. We are, sir, a combination of historians, and by the power of our pens we are laying bare the history of the great West, and the business achievements of its great men. All this you know, so I will merely add that our present undertaking is to write a history of the Gunnison. Great interest

is felt in the region by every one in the East, while, of course, the people of the region are in for it, hot and heavy. In a compact book of one thousand pages, price only ten dollars, we intend to give all the historical, biographical and descriptive information possible."

"In plain words," said Mr. Cortlandt King, interrupting this voluble flow of words, "you want to sell me a book."

"No, sir—no, sir; far from it. A copy of the book will be given to the most prominent man in each town, on condition that he gives his influence to help us."

"In what way?"

"First, to give us facts about his town; secondly, to induce his neighbors to buy the book."

"I can do neither."

"No?"

"No, sir."

"Allow me to ask why?"

"I am willing every man should buy, or refuse to buy, according to his own choice."

"But consider how the work, if completed, will help Straight Flush."

"I am not sure that it will."

"Let me convince you," said Mr. Grefwilde, as easily as though he were about to demonstrate that two and two make four. "Suppose that we scatter a hundred thousand copies of this work through the East, describing the beauties and coming greatness of Straight Flush, and the advantages to be gained by means of the Straight Flush & Valley Railroad?"

The president of the S. F. & V. changed expression, as Grefwilde plainly saw.

"But I can't influence your sales in the East."

"We don't ask you to; our friends there will see to that. All we ask is that you will influence our sales here, and give such information as you deem proper about this town and the new railroad. Now, Mr. King, business is business, and I ask you to consider the result of having two hundred thousand copies of this work go out broadcast through the United States, embellished, in the midst of the history of Straight Flush, with an appropriate portrait with the following inscription beneath it: 'Cortlandt King, Esq., President of the Straight Flush & Valley Railroad.'"

Mr. King started abruptly.

"Nonsense!" he said. "I don't want my portrait in it."

Somewhat singularly, Grefwilde did not press the point.

"That is as you desire," he said, lightly. "Let us say, instead, that there is a biographical article describing you as one of the solid men of Straight Flush, and president of the railroad. What would be the result? Why, the stock of the S. F. & V. would go up with a rush, and there would be an in-pouring of people which would send real estate up in a like manner."

King began to consider the matter seriously. Grefwilde's loquacity did not influence him, for he had seen parrots before, but he did wish to see a boom in S. F. & V. stock, and if the history of the Gunnison was well executed, that very result was probable.

"You have been plain and blunt," he said, "and I will meet you half way. How much are you going to bleed me to write up a glowing article on these subjects, setting this town out as the Garden of Eden of Colorado, and giving the railroad just the lift I indicate as my preference?"

"Well, that will depend a good deal on the length of the article," said Grefwilde, with a slow smile. "We are not avaricious, and there will be no trouble about that."

King, however, was disposed to go about the matter in a thoroughly business way, and when his visitor had established the fact that he really represented E. B. Eager & Co., a bargain was soon made. The railroad magnate was to pay five hundred dollars, and the town and the railroad were to have the best puffs that a trained pen could invent.

"I'll tell you about the S. F. & V., first of all," said King. "I am the father of the enterprise; only for me a rail would never have been laid to Straight Flush. I am also the originator of the novel plan of its formation. I saw the need of a road to this town, which should connect with the Denver line at Bludsoe, and it occurred to me that the proper way to make a success of it was to make every man connected with it a stockholder, from the president of the company down to the brakemen. To this end I formed a pool, placing shares at a figure so that no bummers could get in, and worthy and well-to-do men flocked to my aid. Go among those now engaged in laying the track, and you will find that every one has paid into the pool the sum of five thousand dollars."

"You must have a goodly sum in."

"So we have," said King, with a satisfied smile. "We shall not start in debt like other roads. When the S. F. & V. is built and fully equipped, we shall have the whole thing paid for and money left in the treasury."

"And when the road begins operations, all the come will go toward a dividend, I suppose?"

"Exactly."

"A capital idea. It is a pity all roads are not able to say as much."

"What other road has such sound fundamental principles? What other road has stockholders only for engineers, brakemen, track-layers and flagmen?"

"None, I verily believe, and there is a chance to give the S. F. & V. a big send-off."

Grefwilde had been busily scribbling in his book, jotting down what was told him, and displaying an interest in the matter such as five hundred dollars usually awakens.

Their interview was at this point interrupted, however, for the servant announced that a committee of railroad men wished to see him.

"We shall have to adjourn for the time, but I will ask you to wait in the adjoining room. This is some minor matter which can be quickly attended to; the men are always coming to me for suggestions. I will hurry them off, and then finish with you."

CHAPTER XX.

A FINANCIAL QUESTION.

GREFWILDE replied that he had ample time on his hands, and that he could conveniently await Mr. King's pleasure, so he was ceremoniously ushered into the next room and left alone. The railroad magnate returned to his quarters, and received the delegation with a bland smile and pleasant words, for he was always very kind to his humble associates.

The callers were not polished gentlemen. They were broad-shouldered, hard-handed, rough fellows, who lived by means of hard work, and the fact that they had become stockholders in the Straight Flush & Valley Railroad had not caused them to dress any better.

He who led them was a fair specimen of all the rest, and was named Kyle Kirby.

"I trust all is going well," smiled King.

"The work is goin' wal," replied Kirby.

"Is not everything else going well?"

Kyle cleared his throat, hesitated, and seemed at a loss just how to express himself.

"Speak out, Mr. Kirby."

"I will," was the rather surly reply. "I hev been chose by ther body o' ther stockholders to ax you a few questions."

"Pray do so at once."

"You are president o' ther S. F. & V.?"

"Certainly."

"An' treasurer."

"Acting treasurer," amended Mr. King.

"You hold ther funds, don't ye?"

"Certainly."

"How much?"

"I'm not sure just what has been paid in."

"How many shares are thar?"

"The number has never been limited."

"You kin take in ten thousand, at five thousand dollars each, can't ye?"

"Nonsense! We can't have so many shareholders."

"But there's naught ter prevent yer takin' in all ther cash that's offered?"

"No; but, of course, we are not fools enough to accept such a mass of stockholders that, when dividends are made, there will be little or nothing to go to each person. But, allow me to ask what you're driving at, anyway?"

The magnate spoke sharply, and his heavy brows had gradually lowered, until his face had assumed a most unpleasant scowl. He had private reasons for disliking any such inquiry into his management of the S. F. & V.

There was still another person who was interested in this conversation. Peter Grefwilde did not seem to be a very polite man, for he had no sooner been shut into the next room than he went to the door, applied his ear to the keyhole, and listened carefully.

What he heard seemed to amuse him, for he chuckled audibly.

"A Daniel come to judgment, by George! Something has opened the eyes of these deluded fellows, and they are no longer content to follow blindly after their great modern Moses. They want to know something about the funds they have poured into Judge Westcourt's—I mean, King's—hands so blindly. Now, then, who has put them up to this investigation?"

Kyle Kirby flushed at the magnate's curt tone.

"We're drivin' at an unnerstandin' o' our financial a'fairs; that's ther drift o' our interrogatories," he replied, with responsive curtness.

"What do you want to know?"

"Jest what Lasked."

"Your questions seemed vague to me. Pray, do you imagine I am going to run off with yonder safe and contents?"

He tapped a good-sized iron safe with his boot as he spoke, and the delegates looked at it longingly. It was said to contain the funds of the S. F. & V.—the fruits of their many years' toil.

"We don't mean ter say that," Kirby replied, "but what hev we got ter show that we hev paid money inter ther pool?"

"Haven't you your certificates of stock?"

"Each on us has a sheet o' paper which sez that he owns one share in the S. F. & V., but it don't say he chipped in five thousand dollars, nur nuthin' to that effect."

"Well, what of it?" sharply inquired King.

"Is it your idee o' justice that all we men pay in our hard-earned savin's ter one man, who is president, treasurer an' board o' directors, all in one?" Kirby warmly asked.

Mr. Cortlandt King leaned back in his chair and calmly surveyed the angry faces before him. He regarded his mind as far superior to theirs, and he believed he could mold them like ready clay. He had always done so in the past.

"Kirby, who has been stirring up trouble?"

"Eh?"

"I say, who has been stirring up trouble?"

"I don't clearly understand."

"Pardon me, but you do understand. I came here to Straight Flush and started an enterprise which was bound to make us all rich. We had no banks, no safety deposit vaults, so this safe of mine became our sole reliance. In this, our funds are as safe as though they were in Denver. Men saw that my heart was set on my enterprise, and they trusted me. I asked for full control until the road was built, believing that I understand our wants fully. All this was agreed to, and I have worked like a slave for the corporation. Now, you come to me and insinuate that I am going to run away with your money, and—"

"No, no!" cried Kirby, "we don't insinuate aught o' ther kind."

"Then why do you ask all these questions?"

"Why, we thought—that is—"

"Guilty, as I thought," said Cortlandt King, with a sad, but forgiving, smile. "You suspected me."

Several miners spoke at once to deny the accusation.

"Allow me to ask who started you on this trail."

No answer.

"Was it you, Kirby?"

A quick denial trembled on the man's lips, but he checked it and then replied more slowly:

"There was nobody who started it. Ther idee sorter got abroad that we orter knows our prezact standin', but I reckon it is all right."

King had won. His plausible manner had disarmed the men of their suspicions, at least for the present, and they were satisfied to go away and leave him full master of the field and of their money. They went.

The railroad magnate looked after them with a scornful smile.

"What fools these mortals be!" he muttered; and then a tap at the door was followed by the entrance of a young lady.

It was Miriam. She had not changed perceptibly during the year. Her separation from the man who had broken his promise to cherish her had occurred under circumstances of such cowardice on his part that she had not endured much suffering, and she looked like anything but a victim of a broken heart. Dane Templeton was only an unpleasant memory.

Mr. Peter Grefwilde, hearing her voice, had actually opened his door a trifle, and his eyes twinkled behind his blue-glass goggles.

"A fine woman!—a splendid woman!" he muttered. "By George, I wish I could get her portrait for the history of the Gunnison. Reckon the book would sell then!"

"Father," said Miriam, "I have had an unexpected meeting."

"With whom?" he absently asked.

"Dane Templeton!"

The ex-judge started, and a scowl disfigured his face.

"That scoundrel! Has he dared come here after his villainous behavior?"

"You forget that he is a scion of an old Georgia house," said the girl, with a calm smile.

"Proof has never been offered to show whether he is or not, but he acted the scoundrel to perfection by deserting you when the train wrecked. I forbid you—"

"Why will you waste your breath?" calmly asked Miss Westcourt-King. "My opinion coincides with yours, and I have ordered Mr. Templeton never again to address me. Why, after what has occurred, he is the most contemptible of men to me. His cowardly desertion actually makes me think kindly of Bracebridge, the detective."

"The blazes it does!" muttered Peter Grefwilde, nearly dropping his goggles from sudden excitement.

"He was a scoundrel, too!" declared King, hotly. "Only for him, we should now be on our old place at Belpain. I could wring his villainous neck!"

"You forget that he was killed in the railroad fight," said Miriam, gravely.

"Had almost forgotten it myself," muttered Grefwilde.

"Well, well, let it drop," said King. "What has become of Dane Templeton?"

"He went off in hot anger; that's all I know about him."

"He may try to make trouble."

"Bah! What can he do?"

"You forget, Miriam, that if he was really the Cain Magruder of the old days, he may still be able to command the help of Barb Brennan's wreckers."

"I have heard nothing about Brennan lately."

"There is every reason to believe he has been

severely wounded and laid up. He was active enough just after Braceridge's death. That detective was a good one, when he stuck to legitimate business. But, as you say, Barb is very quiet now."

"And aunt Margaret?"

"Do not mention her," said King, with a frown. "But, Miriam, I forgot that I have a visitor waiting in the next room. Remain here and let me introduce you. Use him well, for he will be useful."

The last words were spoken in a low tone, and then King walked to the door, opened it and ushered in Mr. Grefwilde.

The latter had his note-book under his arm, and looked as innocent and cheerful as though he had not been playing the listener. Miriam was prepared to receive him graciously, but she was somewhat surprised when he briskly advanced, on being introduced, and shook hands with great warmth.

"Glad to see you, Miss King—I assure you I am. If there is one thing I am prepared to spread myself in ink about, in the Gunnison, it is the beauty of its women; and if I am allowed, I shall be happy to introduce your portrait in my book as the belle and beauty of the region. I have been looking for a fit subject, and now that I see you, Miss King, my professional soul goes out to you with a rush. May I put you down for a steel portrait?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAN WITH THE KNIFE.

THE effusiveness of the historian of the Gunnison rather embarrassed both Miriam and her father, but they had seen too many commercial travelers and book-agents to be long at a loss for words. Miriam informed Grefwilde that, while she fully appreciated the honor he wished to confer upon her, a natural reluctance to be world-renowned would compel her to decline to appear in his book as the beauty of the Gunnison.

Peter looked disappointed, but ups and downs are a feature of his business, and he did not lose his elasticity of temper. He devoted half of his time to business with the ex-judge, and the other half to paying gallant compliments to Miriam, and seemed perfectly happy.

His transaction with King was not the work of an hour, however; it would probably stretch through many days if the railroad magnate became the main character in the Gunnison history; and when darkness drew near, a good supper was given him and he took his departure.

He had taken quarters at the Strong Right Hand, the leading hotel of the town, and toward this place he took his way, but not many steps had he gone before a dark figure suddenly loomed up in his path.

"Wait a minute," said the unknown.

"All right. Take out your watch and time me," coolly replied Grefwilde.

"You're a joker, I see."

"Oh no, only the right bower."

"More likely the knave," retorted the stranger.

"Better that than the jack—with the long ears."

"Oh! you're a funny galoot!" sneered the man.

"Speaking of that reminds me you ain't far behind," and Peter looked with considerable curiosity at his companion.

The latter had at first seemed to be merely a man in a long cloak and big hat, but a closer scrutiny had developed the fact that he wore some kind of a mask over his face.

"See here," Grefwilde added, "I'd just admire to have your portrait for a history of the Gunnison I am compiling. I can give you a prime steel engraving for the small sum of two hundred dollars, or a wood-cut for half-price. I would call you the 'Missing Link at Last Found,' and you would be allowed to trace your ancestry back to William the Conqueror or Pontius Pilate. Sample copies of the book—"

"What rubbish is that?"

"What! Rubbish? Great Scott! you don't mean to say the book is rubbish, do you?"

"Silence!" was the sharp reply. "I know nothing about this matter to which you refer. Be still an' let me talk. You have just left the house of Cortlandt King?"

"In two words, noble Link, I have."

"What business had you with him?"

"Haven't I told you?"

"No."

"Then I don't think I will. I am not giving away what I know this week, noble Link."

"Call me the Horned Dragon."

"All right; Horned Dragon, or Fiery Dragon. It's all one to me. Now, about your portraiture—"

"Enough of nonsense. I want to know why you went to King. Are you a stockholder in his precious road?"

"Do I look like a bloated bondholder? Not any; I am not concerned with the S. F. & V. I am a historian, sir; the man who is destined to make the Gunnison famous from the Golden Gate to Cape Cod."

The masked stranger was silent for a moment,

but he seemed studying Grefwilde as well as the darkness would permit.

"I reckon you're all right," he finally said.

"You can bet your shoe-buckles on that, and, unlike you, I manage to talk one language all the time."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are a poor actor. One moment you use the uncouth language of the Western miner; the next, you soar up to the dizzy heights of Yale and Harvard."

"What of that?" sharply demanded the Dragon.

"Nothing. I only mention it as an item; that's all."

"Well, attend to your own business and you will live the longer. Keep to yourself; we have a way here in Straight Flush of disposing of meddlesome people. That's all for to-night. I'll bid you good-by."

The speaker was turning, but Grefwilde stopped him.

"Wait a minute. Can't I persuade you to furnish your portrait for the Gunnison history? Steel engraving, two hundred dollars; wood-cut, half-price—biography included. Let me add your name to those of the prominent citizens who—"

Mr. Grefwilde had drawn out his ever-ready note-book and pencil, ready to close the bargain, but the Horned Dragon turned abruptly and strode away without another word.

"Confounded impolite," muttered the historian, "but what can we expect from a connecting link? Horned Dragon! Quite a fancy name. Strikes me there is an unfamiliar familiarity in his voice, and I may yet know him better. I'll have his portrait in my book if possible."

In the meanwhile the man who had assumed the peculiar *sobriquet* of the "Horned Dragon" was stalking away toward the southern side of the village. He finally paused before a shanty, rapped, and, on being directed to enter, passed on.

Kyle Kirby sat by the table, moodily smoking.

He nodded at sight of his visitor, but did not seem greatly pleased.

"Wal," said the Dragon, in his broadest dialect, "what war yer luck, pard?"

"None."

"None?"

"That's what I said."

"Did King refuse ter comply with yer demand?"

"Wuss," said Kyle, in disgust. "He's that mealy-mouthed that he talked the hull on us inter cocked hats. I b'lieve he bewitched us; tany rate, he evaded ther p'nt, an' we jest come away like kittens."

The Dragon swore audibly.

"Why, Kirby, I tho'rt you had more sand."

"So did I, but he soft-soaped us all ter nothin'."

"An' you let up on him? See yer, old man, that ain't ther way ter freeze him outer Straight Flush."

Kyle was silent, but he smoked furiously.

"Be you stockholders goin' ter let him skip out with yer money?"

"No, by ther Eternal!" declared Kyle, fiercely. "He ain't goin' ter do it. He laid us out in ther fu'st round, but we will hev another try. Our money is in ther Straight Flush Railroad, an' we're goin' ter hev ther good on't."

"Then you'd better stir yer shanks. All you chaps has paid in yer five thousand each, an' he holds ther boodle at his will. He's president, treasurer and board o' directors, and that's nothin' ter prevent him from skippin' out with ther hull pile. Mind, I don't say he will, but think o' ther temptation!"

"King asked who hed inocerlated us wi' sech ideas."

The Dragon chuckled.

"He did, eh?"

"Yes."

"O' course you said nothin' about me?"

"O' course not. But see hyar, what's your game, anyhow?"

"I've told ye. King is no friend o' mine, an', knowin' he's crooked, I want ter keep him from runnin' away with yer pile o' money."

"S'pose he's on ther squar?"

"Then he orter be willin' ter do what is squar."

Kyle Kirby was silent, but he was looking sharply at his companion. What sort of a face was behind that mask? The stockholders in the S. F. & V. had been content to let King run the whole business until this man appeared, and aroused their suspicions by showing them the power the magnate had to ruin them financially if he was so inclined.

"You want me ter show my hand," said the Dragon, his face moving with what was undoubtedly a smile.

"That's it ter a dot."

"Wal, you've heerd all that counts in ther game. I say I don't like King, an' ef he wants ter muzzle with yer boodle, I mean to prevent it by puttin' ye up ter his game."

"Ef he means mischief, it won't work!" declared Kyle, striking the table. "I've put every cent I had in ther railroad, and King has got

ter deal squar'. I'll hev a mass-meetin' o' ther men, an' thar shall be a treasurer a'p'nted, by thunder!"

"That's ther figger, old man," said the Dragon delightedly. "One-man rule ain't fair, nowhar, an' King orter deal justly with you. That's enough fur ter-night; I'll see ye ag'in."

The masked man left the shanty and walked slowly away.

"I reckon it will be all right," he muttered. "These men are thoroughly aroused at last, and I shall succeed in freezing King out of Straight Flush. Curse him, I'll ruin him if I can!"

Deep in thought as he was, he was not regardless of what was occurring around him, and he suddenly wheeled at the sound of a脚步声.

He was none too soon. A man had crept up carefully behind him, and as the Dragon saw an uplifted hand he was not slow to suspect a knife was in it.

He leaped agilely backward, and the hand fell with unavailing viciousness. A curse followed.

"Keep back!" ordered the Dragon, sharply.

"Keep back, or it'll be a cold day for you."

He had drawn a revolver, and a double click sounded audibly, but it did not serve to frighten the would-be assassin. Still clutching his knife, he made a wild rush for the masked man. The latter stood firm and fired. Once, twice—and then the assassin threw up his arms and went down in a heap, lying motionless.

"It was his own fault," muttered the Dragon.

He moved forward and touched the fallen man. The latter stirred feebly.

"You've done fur me!" he said, hoarsely. "I'm gone, but you won't git cl'ar so easy. Thar is others ter foller, an' you're doomed."

"Why did you try to kill me?"

"Don't ye wish ye knew. Ha! ha! I don't tell nothin'—but you will see. Ther boss will settle you. Ye are—a dead man!"

With the last suggestive words on his lips the unknown fell back lifeless. The Dragon struck a match and looked at his face. It was coarse and brutal, but unknown to him. The light faded and left him in the dark in a double sense.

"So it seems I am not to have a clear swing at Straight Flush. While I prey, I am to be preyed upon. What the dickens it means I don't know, but I'll keep my eyes wide open, and I reckon I shall be able to look out for Number One."

CHAPTER XXII.

ENTER BARB!

"ROSE, you are gloomy to-night."

"Why should I be otherwise?"

"Why should you be gloomy?"

"This life is wearing my life away."

"Nonsense, child; you are weak and nervous to-night. What is there in all this to trouble you? Have you ever been where the air is purer than here? To me, it is a blessed relief from care and trouble."

"My nature is not like yours, aunt Margaret. That you are strong and brave, your past life has proven. I lack the courage necessary for great deeds."

"Yet, you are firm in your resolution to obtain justice from Judge Westcourt."

"I cannot forget my mother's wrongs. For myself I make no claim. All I ask is that he acknowledge to the world that his marriage with my mother was legal. The fortune about which uncle Aaron has always said so much is no inducement to me."

"Young people never truly appreciate money."

"I hope I am not covetous."

"You will find in later life that money is the lever which moves the world, which makes and unmakes men, and fixes one's position in the world."

The speakers were Rose Thomas and Meg Brennan.

On the ridge which lay to the west of Straight Flush was a small cabin, so nestled in among the rocks and trees that none of the village people had yet discovered it. It had stood there for a period of three weeks. Had it been seen, the discoverers would have wondered who its builders were. With that part we have nothing to do at present; enough that its occupants were the two persons before mentioned.

To Rose it indeed seemed like a sort of prison, but she might have thought better of it had she not deliberately deserted John Loring when she came there.

The two had quarreled. It was not a serious or bitter affair, but the conductor had asked her to keep wholly away from Judge Westcourt, and forget him; while she had insisted that it was her duty to obtain justice for her mother.

She did not care whether the world knew that she was Westcourt's daughter, for it seemed no honor to have such a father; but she did want justice for Mabel Carter, who had loved him and become his wife, only to be cast off when "Roderic Easton" saw fit to return to his old life.

So Rose, who had never been suspected of a strong will in the past, persuaded herself that she was very angry with Loring, and had disappeared from his sight and knowledge, and come to straight Flush, conducted by Meg Brennan, who had discovered the judge's new residence.

and then entered upon a vague and Quixotic crusade against him. How she was to obtain justice she did not know, but Meg and another ally, of whom more hereafter, had charge of the matter, and promised success.

This evening, looking out into the darkness, she felt gloomy and homesick, and all Meg's arguments could not rouse her.

She was not destined to stay by the window long.

As she stood there she suddenly saw a man's face rise as though from empty air and, reaching the level of the window, look squarely into her own.

She sprang back with a gasping cry and ran straight to Meg, her face perfectly white.

"What is the matter?" demanded the wrecker's wife, arousing like a tigress standing over her young.

"A man! A face at the window! Oh! something terrible is going to happen; there was nothing but a head!"

A smile flitted across Meg's face. She knew Rose's nature well, and for her own part had no fear of heads which had no bodies attached. But she feared that Rose had actually seen a man of flesh and blood, and, like an animal that has been hunted for years, she knew that she was never really safe.

But she showed no fear.

She had drawn a revolver with a quick movement, and now stood looking fixedly at the suspected point, ready to act with energy if an enemy actually appeared. She looked like some stage-character of heroic mold, but had not her whole life been a tragedy?

A period of silence followed. Neither of the women spoke, and, outside, all was as still as a tomb.

But only for a short space of time.

Heavy footfalls sounded outside the door, and then came an imperious rap.

They had one visitor who often came to the cabin, but they felt sure it was not he who rapped. But Rose looked up in her face.

"It is Mr. Magruder," she said.

"No. Your first theory was better than your last. We have enemies near; that was not a friendly summons; but who are they? Another knock?"

It had sounded as she said, and she suddenly stirred and advanced to the door.

"Who is there?"

A hoarse laugh followed.

"Come, old woman, don't play ther innocent. Hev you forgot ther old signal so soon?"

Meg's face suddenly brightened; nay, it grew the picture of happiness; and she cast aside the bar and opened the door.

A man crossed the threshold.

Black Barb Brennan stood in the cabin!

Rose trembled, for she felt only fear for the terrible wrecker, but Meg betrayed her joy in every way. She seemed about to rush to his arms, but he turned and secured the door, and then motioned her to a seat.

"Set down! I like ter see folks sociable when I go a-visitin'; no solem'cholly fur me. Set down!"

He set the example by taking a chair himself, and then looked at his wife with a scowl.

"So ye run away," he said, surlily.

"Run away? What do you mean?"

"From Trump Card."

"You were in prison, and I did not expect you out so soon. I intended to return to Trump Card before your term expired. How did you escape, Barber?"

"All that sounds nice an' pritty, but it won't go down. You tried ter shake me; that's what ye tried ter do."

"I swear that I did not!" cried the woman, her face anxious now that she saw he was really angry. "How was I to know you would be at liberty now?"

"Did ye ever know a prison ter hold Barb Brennan?" he demanded, forgetting his anger in self-pride. "How did I git out? Why, I walked out, same ez I allays do when I git tired o' prison. Ha! ha! wa'n't it funny fur them ter give me five months ez a chicken-thief, an' never suspect that they had Barb Brennan. Ha! ha!"

"And you broke jail?"

"Yas; cut my term short a half. But never mind that. So you're hyar with ther pink-an'-white lily."

He looked at Rose, who trembled more than ever.

"Do you know her, Barber?"

"Course I do. Did I ever furgit a face? What's yer game? Want ter bring old Westcourt ter tarms?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe I kin help you. I've come back ter raise ther biggest row ever seen. I'll gather ther old boys 'round me, an' we'll make ther Overland and all other roads jest howl. I want ter see that precious brother o' yours git his road a-runnin'. Great Caesar! won't that be lively times on them rails!"

The wrecker broke into loud chuckles, and it was plain that he would enjoy nothing more than terrorizing over a road conducted by Judge Westcourt.

"The road will never be finished!" suddenly

declared Rose, like an automaton gifted with speech.

"What?"

"It will never be finished."

"Who'll prevent it?"

"I shall."

"No, you won't; by ther Eternal, you won't. I say that road goes on. It shall be built an' run, ef I hev ter take my gang an' stand over ther track-layers an' force 'em ter work at ther p'int o' ther revolver!"

And Barb brought his hand down on the table with a force which made it dance.

Rose was silenced. Her momentary courage had ebbed away, and she would as soon have defied a grizzly bear as the broad-shouldered ruffian who sat there and plucked at a red handkerchief about his neck in the old way.

Before more could be said another rap sounded at the door. Both women started, and Meg looked at her husband with a troubled face.

"Open!" he said.

She did not stir, and he arose, strode to the door and flung aside the bar. The door opened, and a man entered. He was plainly surprised to see the wrecker, and he recoiled somewhat, but Barb closed and barred the way of escape. He seemed to enjoy the surprise of the newcomer in a sort of grizzly bear style—a way common to him, whether he was pleased or angry.

The latest arrival was Cain Magruder, alias Dane Templeton.

He was not in the least pleased to see Brennan, but, after a hasty glance at Meg, he recovered his usual coolness.

"So it's you, Barb. I would as soon have expected to see Julius Caesar. Was under the impression you were behind bars."

"Bars don't hold me, my cherub, an' ther jail don't stand that kin. You orter know that, but it seems you don't. You've got a right nice family gatherin' hyer, an' I s'pose you've been chucklin' big 'cause Black Barb was s'posed ter be out o' ther way for some time."

Magruder had taken a chair with an air of perfect ease.

"You seem to think we are down on you, old man. Well, I don't know that I love you very much, but—"

"You love my wife more," scowled the wrecker. "Time brings about queer changes. You was hot ag'in' her when she give ye away at yer weddin' an' spilt yer tie-up with ther judge's darter, but it seems you've made up an' like her wal."

"You are a coward and a liar!" retorted Cain, fiercely.

A red flush rushed to Brennan's face, and he jerked a revolver from his pocket and sprung toward the younger man, an unmistakable light gleaming in his deep-set eyes—the light of a murderous purpose.

"Take that back, or I'll shoot ye like ther cur ye be!" he hissed, savagely.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DRAGON MAKES A FRANK PROPOSAL.

A FRIGHTENED cry fell from Rose's lips, while Meg sprung forward and caught her husband's arm.

"Barber!" she cried, imploringly, but he shook her off.

"I say he'll take them words back or chaw lead!" he asserted, all his ugliness aroused.

Cain Magruder looked at him coolly.

"When you have apologized for insulting those here present, I will admit that you are not a coward. I suppose I shall have to admit that anyway. But when you lie, why shouldn't I tell you of it?"

The wrecker glared at him in silence for a moment, and then thrust his revolver away.

"Hev it as you will," he growled. "I didn't believe what I said, an' we kin afford ter drop it. But I'd like ter know why you an' Meg kin be friends arter what occurred in ther past."

"As you lately said, time brings about strange changes. I hated your wife for stopping my marriage, but I feel that it's just as well. Brinsley Westcourt is a fallen star, though he blazes somewhat as Cortlandt King. But his days of power are past, and he cannot raise me to a seat on the throne. My object now is to bleed him."

"So-ho! In what way?"

"Don't I hold a sword over his head? He is carefully disguising his identity, but one word from me will strip him of the mantle of honor and greatness. Then what would become of the railroad project? It would go to smash at once."

"Be sure you don't speak, then."

"Why not?"

"Ther railroad must be built."

"What do you care about it?"

"Ther best way ter make him squirm is ter let him build his durned railroad, an' then make him squirm. You've got a right clever leetle game hyer, an' you three ar' pitted ag'in' Mr. Cortlandt King, but I am hyer ter argue you out on't."

"You had better let us alone," said Cain, with a scowl. "Am I not right, Miss Rose?"

"You are. I am the one of all others to decide in this matter, and I say that we don't want any help," replied Rose, with a burst of courage.

"We'll see," replied Barb.

He stepped to the door and whistled, and then another man almost immediately appeared. He came in quickly, and then Rose uttered a subdued exclamation. She recognized John Loring.

The conductor did not look to be in a very amiable mood, and after his gaze had wandered from face to face it finally rested on Magruder's, in a manner anything but amiable.

"Sir," he said, "there isn't room enough here for both of us."

"Then you'd better get out," retorted Cain.

"One of us will, right speedily, and it rests with yonder lady to say which. Miss Thomas, choose between me and this man."

He pointed to Cain, and his voice was frigid.

"John," cried Rose, "whatever do you mean?"

"I mean—that it looks as though you had thrown me over for this infernal scoundrel, and I am going to have plain words on the subject. You run away, and I now find you with this reptile—"

Cain Magruder sprung to his feet.

"Take those words back, or I'll break your head!" he cried.

"No, ye won't!" interrupted Brennan, in high glee. "Jack Lo is my friend, an' I back him up ev'ry time."

"I'm able to back myself," said Loring, sturdily. "If Mister Magruder wants a hack at me, just let him come on. I'm always at home, and the latch-string is out."

Meg stepped between the angry men.

"There is no cause for all this trouble," she said firmly. "If you will listen to me, John Loring, I can explain away your absurd jealous fears. Cain Magruder is not an occupant of this cabin. Rose and I live here alone, and we are under obligations to no one. What if Magruder visits us? He, too, has a grudge against Judge Westcourt, and we are working to a common end. That is all. Be sensible, Mr. Loring, and hold no spite against a girl who is sincerely devoted to you."

"I want proof of the fact," said John, stubbornly. "Why should she go running around after Brinsley Westcourt? No good will ever come of it. The best thing she can do is to let him forever alone and come to me. It may be policy for me to shut my eyes and believe blindly, but I don't see the point. I know you all, and I know no good of you. The law wants you all, and I don't want you. Rose must choose between you and me. That's flat!"

"Go in, High-Jack-Lo!" shouted Brennan. "You're ther boyee fur my money. Don't give way a p'int."

"Fool! will you mind your own business?" cried Cain, angrily.

"I'll mind yours, which is jest as good."

Meg saw that she was utterly unable to control these antagonistic elements. She believed that if she could see Loring alone she could quell his suspicions, but it could not be done while Cain was there. She turned to the latter and asked him if he would go.

"Not while Loring is here," was the stubborn reply.

"I'll order you all out of the place yet!" cried Meg, angry at such conduct.

"Much good it'll do!" said Barb, rubbing his hands. "We are here for a family picnic, an' we're goin' ter hev it ef our boots hold on, you bet."

"Somebody is going," said Cain, furiously, "for stand this longer I won't. I am not going to be abused just because I have befriended these women when they were in trouble. They are nothing to me, and the man who says they are is a liar. But, as I said before, somebody has got to go."

He drew a revolver as he spoke and turned the muzzle upon John Loring.

"Who goes?" he demanded.

Rose sprung between them.

"Shoot, if you will!" she exclaimed, "but it is in my flesh the bullet will lodge."

But Loring caught her up and set her aside.

"Cain Magruder," he said, steadily, "you and I are men who ought to be able to face any danger we bring upon us. This is no place for fighting, but I am willing to give you satisfaction when and where you will. I waive all claim to Miss Thomas—"

"Then you are a fool!" bluntly declared Magruder. "I tell you we are nothing to each other; I am not seeking a wife to any great extent since my affair with Westcourt's girl. What! is there anything wonderfully strange in our alliance? How happens it I see you such good friends with Barb Brennan, when, only last fall, he wrecked your train at Hickhack Gap, and then fought you and your train men—I refer to the night that David Baceridge was killed. If you and Barb join hands, why should you wonder at any other combination?"

It began to occur to Loring that he had been hasty. Every one else seemed in a pacific mood, while he had insisted on stirring up a row. This was plainly foolish, and he decided to turn over

a new leaf. Matters were mixed beyond his power of straightening, and the best way to make all clear was to go slow.

Peace was established, and it was decided that, while Barb should remain at the cabin, John and Cain should depart, coming again the next day to reach, if possible, an amicable understanding.

Loring did not like the idea of Brennan being under the same roof with Rose, but there was no help for it. As has well been said, adversity makes strange bedfellows. After the fight at Hickhack Gap, when Brennan wrecked the train, Loring had sworn to shoot him at sight; but when they actually did meet, the wrecker had informed him that he knew where Rose was, and had become his guide to the place.

Barb had been a faithful guide, but would he be equally peaceable as a lodger?

It was a question not to be answered, but the conductor had to make the best of it. He and Magruder went out together.

"Do you go to the village?" the latter asked.

"I have no other place to which to go."

"Then I will see you there and have a frank talk. There is no reason why we should be enemies. My alliance with Miss Thomas and Brennan's wife is merely one of mutual war against Judge Westcourt, or, as he now calls himself, Cortlandt King."

"If you can prove that, I shall be glad to form a truce," replied Loring, bluntly.

"Believe me, it is so. Of course it is nothing to me whether you and the girl make up, but I certainly don't want to be the cause of a rupture between you. Good-night!"

Magruder walked away, while Loring looked after him thoughtfully.

"You talk all right," he muttered, "but I wouldn't trust you the distance of a locomotive's headlight. You're the chap who claimed to be the representative of the Georgia Templetons. Representative blazes! You're a first-class kunk, Mr. Cain Magruder, and I don't bet on you in the least. I wish my old friend, Braceridge, was alive now."

He walked on toward the village, moving slowly, because he did not wish to overtake Cain, but had gone only half the distance when a man appeared in his path.

"Hello!"

"Hello!" replied Loring, slowly and suspiciously, for the stranger was wrapped up in a cloak and hat to a degree which naturally aroused suspicion.

"Your friend, Magruder, has just passed."

"My friend! Who are you that knows who my friends are?"

"Oh! as for names, I am called the Horned Dragon."

"The blazes you are! Well, I haven't any great amount of confidence in a man who covers his identity under such a title."

"What's the odds? Here in the West, we all have our false names. Isn't Horned Dragon as good as John Smith, or Big-nosed Ben?"

"We won't argue the point," replied Loring, trying to pass on.

"Wait a bit! I have a word for your private car. I can give you news of importance if you will swear not to betray me."

"Don't know that I care for news."

"Not if it concerns Rose Thomas?"

"What do you know of her?" angrily demanded Loring.

"Much that you would like to know. I am no friend of Cain Magruder, whom I suspect of trying to kill me through a tool an hour back. Swear not to betray me to him and I'll give you the straight tip as to his game at Straight Flush."

The conductor hesitated for a moment.

"I promise," he then replied.

"So be it. Well, Rose Thomas is his wife!"

Loring started back, and a feeling of combined despair and fierce resentment assailed him. He had been somewhat violent at the cabin, but his faith in Rose had only wavered, and he really believed she would clear herself of all doubts, and, under his persuasion, forsake the bad company she was in and go with him never to again separate. But this assertion was a severe blow.

"Man," he cried, "do you know what you are talking about?"

"I do, sir. I know Magruder feels very bitter because he failed to marry King's daughter, and that he now aspires to bleed that person all he can. He was shrewd enough to see that Rose Thomas would be a powerful instrument to that end, and—you know she is almost a monomaniac on the subject of compelling King to do justice to her mother—he so convinced her that their interests were mutual that she married him. In her infatuation I do not believe she has yet fully realized what she has done, but she is his wife, just the same."

"Can you prove this?" asked Loring, huskily.

"Yes. The marriage took place at Crested Butte, and all the proofs are there. You can see them by going to that town."

The conductor stood dazed and miserable. Rose married! He had centered all his hopes of the future on her, and the falling of his castle left a miserable wreck.

"I must prove it," he muttered.

"Come with me and I'll give you all the

points I can. I have a place near here—the Horned Dragon's home. Come, and I will tell you all I know."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CORTLANDT KING ACTS HASTILY.

KYLE KIRBY was fully in earnest about calling a meeting of the stockholders of the S. F. & V., as indicated. The glamour which the railroad magnate had managed to throw around the first committee abated as soon as touched by the fresh air, and when the sturdy spokesman had talked with his companions it was found that all were of one mind.

That evening they held a consultation, and, as a result, a second committee waited on Cortlandt King the following morning and presented a paper setting forth their views. They had expressed themselves as follows:

"WHEREAS, The several persons who have become associated as partners in the establishing of the Straight Flush & Valley railroad, have each and all paid into the treasury the sum of five thousand dollars, they feel that matters should be conducted on a strictly business basis, and it is hereby

"Resolved, That it is the opinion of said stockholders that a full board of officers and directors be appointed, to consist of a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary and board of directors; and that new certificates of stock be issued, each of which shall clearly express its signification; and that a clear system of bookkeeping, open to examination by all stockholders, be hereafter maintained."

When Mr. King read this paper he knew he could no longer be an absolute monarch of the corporation. He did not fear being ousted, nor that he would cease to be the "great man" of Straight Flush, but it was plain that the other stockholders were resolved to have their rights.

Kyle Kirby had prepared himself for a warm argument, but, to his surprise, none was needed. King's only remark in opposition was to the effect that he disliked red-tape, but he promptly agreed to all and the following evening was named as the time when the election of officers should take place.

He bowed his visitors out smilingly, but when the door was closed upon them his expression changed and he swore audibly.

"Curse them for a pack of suspicious fools. They are confoundedly afraid of their beggarly dollars. So they think I want to run away with the cash capital. They want to tie me down so my power will be but nominal, but if I can secure a treasurer to suit me, all will yet be well. A treasurer! Who the dickens shall be the man? I want one who will come and go at my word—who shall he be?"

The magnate paced the room in deep thought. He mentally ran over the list of his associates, but none of them proved perfectly satisfactory.

Suddenly, however, his face brightened.

"The very man, by Jove—if I can bring him into the game. Such fellows are always unscrupulous, and I think he will do anything for money. I'll try it!"

He called a servant, gave an order, and then sat down to await the result. At the end of half an hour he saw Peter Grefwilde coming along the street, his note-book under his arm and his blue goggles looking like a pair of gun-muzzles.

The great historian of the Gunnison was just turning from the street when he met a mutilated miner at whom he looked with interest.

"My friend, you seem to be lame!"

"Lame? O' course I'm lame. Why shouldn't I be? Got blown up in a mine explosion, an' one leg is a wreck. See hyar, too; my left hand is gone, an' ef you kin see aught that's purty about my face, with its scars and scalds, jest say so."

"You are not handsome," acknowledged Grefwilde, "but, to me, you are interesting. I shall be pleased to insert your portrait in my history of the Gunnison—steel engraving, only two hundred dollars; wood-cut, half-price. A biographical sketch is thrown in gratis. For the small sum mentioned you will be added to the gallery of fame. Shall I put you down?"

"You go to blazes!" cried the astonished miner. "D'y'e 'spose I've got money ter throw away in that style? You'd like ter trade on my infirmities, wouldn't ye, ye pestiferous book-agent!"

And the maimed miner hobbled off in high indignation, leaving the astonished historian with his hungry pencil suspended over his note-book. He really seemed dazed, but nothing could long dash his buoyant spirits. He smiled, turned and entered the house.

Cortlandt King received him graciously, and conversation ran on unimportant subjects for awhile.

"What are your maturer impressions of the S. F. & V. railroad?" the magnate finally asked.

"Every hour increases my high opinion of it, sir," replied Grefwilde. "There's a rich boodle in it."

"I am glad you think so, for I have sent for you on business. I have a proposition for you. How would you like to be a stockholder in the road?"

"You said shares were five thousand each?"

"Yes."

"If they were selling at five hundred, I couldn't buy a bell-cord," was the frank reply.

"So much the better. Now, look here, Mr. Grefwilde; business is business, and you are no tell-tale?"

"Bet your boots on that, Mr. President."

"Well, we are about to have an election of officers, and as I want a treasurer who is in sympathy with my views, it struck me you were just the man."

King looked keenly to see the result of his bait.

"By George, if you'll stave off the election till the history of the Gunnison is out, I'll take the shares and the treasurship both in one!" Grefwilde declared.

"It can't be deferred, but what if I convey two shares to you without payment on your part, assuming the debt as a private one due me?"

"My paper isn't worth a cock-eyed Chinee's wash-bowl."

"I am willing to take your word; I want no paper."

Grefwilde was silent and seemed bewildered, but King went on steadily:

"As I said, I want a treasurer of my own selection, and I therefore propose to convey to you two shares of the S. F. & V. stock—excepting myself, no other man has more than one—and when the election comes off you will have a claim on their votes."

The historian nodded three times in quick succession, and then grew more serious.

"But suppose they should elect some other man, after all?"

"Leave that to me. I have a scheme by which you will come so prominently before the meeting that your election will be carried with a rush."

"Then, by George, sir, you may put me down for the shares!" said Grefwilde, with enthusiasm. "I feel it in my bones that I am destined to become a great railroad man. Gads! I may yet be obliged to put my own portrait in the History of the Gunnison."

"If you become the treasurer, you will also become an inmate of my house—you see the safe is here—when not busy elsewhere."

"Nothing would please me better; I know good quarters when I see them; and it strikes me that safe would make a good writing-desk. I could make myself at home without trouble, and if you have any cast-off clothing, I think it would just about fit me."

"Perhaps I can accommodate you."

"Would also like the head of my bed toward the north, as the electric current passes from south to north."

"Would you like a feather-bed, or mattress?" somewhat sarcastically asked King.

"Such small things are immaterial. I believe in a guest conforming to the habits of his host."

By this time King had two papers ready, each of which certified that Peter Grefwilde had paid the sum of five thousand dollars and become owner of one share in the S. F. & V.

"These papers are a trifle informal, but elaborate ones will be substituted for them after the election of a full board of officers," the president explained.

The interview lasted for half an hour longer, during which time King fully explained what he wanted. The historian gave close attention, and by several worldly remarks showed his coacher that he would not be a drag upon the enterprise, whatever else he might be.

Then he took his departure.

King looked after him thoughtfully.

"Have I done wisely? The fellow is sharp enough to see that there must be some secret purpose at the bottom of my proposal to him. Am I right in supposing that, like most of his class, he is a flippant fellow who would do anything for money? I believe I have sized him correctly, but it is running a good deal of risk to take a stranger into one's confidence thus. But I think this penny-a-liner would sell everything but his soul for ten thousand dollars. Ha! ha! he thinks he is that much in—won't he be surprised if, some day, he finds his paper worth no more than rags?"

Little suspecting the thoughts that were in King's mind, the historian walked briskly down the street. Not far had he gone, however, when he was accosted by a man whose dust-covered garments indicated that he had just finished a long journey.

"Beg parding," he said, "but kin you tell me whar Mr. Cortlandt King lives?"

Grefwilde shifted his note-book under his left arm and assumed a wise look.

"I suppose you refer to our gifted fellow-citizen, the president of the S. F. & V. railroad?"

"Cortlandt King is ther name, but I don't know whether he's a railroader or what he is."

"You must be a stranger here."

"I am."

"Then let me tell you that a history of the Gunnison is being written up, and that I am the biographical and historical writer thereof. I should be pleased to have your portrait in the work; steel engraving, two hundred dollars; wood-cut, half-price. This includes a biographical sketch—"

"Rubbish!" said the stranger. "I don't want aught ter do with yer durned hist'ry. Kin you tell me whar King lives?"

"You're an undeserving viper," said Gref-

wilde, severely, "but there is the house not a hundred yards away. Good-day, boor!"

And the speaker strode away in high indignation.

The dust-covered stranger looked at the house, and then drew from his pocket a crumpled slip of paper.

On it were these few lines in bold writing:

"AARON THOMAS:—'f you want to see Brinsley Westcourt, or hear of Rose, go to Straight Flush and find Cortlandt King."

"It's an anonymous letter," muttered the traveler, "but I'll go in an' see Cortlandt King. Ef he is Judge Westcourt, I'll hev satisfaction or his miser'ble life."

CHAPTER XXV.

AARON MAKES HIMSELF DISAGREEABLE.

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir," the servant announced to Cortlandt King.

The magnate frowned.

"Will those fellows never cease worrying me about the railroad?" he muttered. "I suppose they want to know now which side up to lay the rails. Let him come in!"

He then busied himself with his papers, and when the caller's footsteps sounded did not look up, but merely said, "Sit down!"

There was no answer, and he suddenly turned, impressed by a feeling that something was wrong. Then he knew something was wrong, and his usually steady eyes quailed a little.

"Aaron Thomas!" he exclaimed.

"Aaron Thomas, it is, Judge Westcourt," replied the dusty traveler. "I've called on ye onc't more, an' ye don't seem overly glad ter see me."

"I am not," replied King, in a deep voice.

"Well, I'm glad ter see you; right glad. I've looked fur you fur more than one day. I've found ye at last, an' now we'll squar' ther old account."

Aaron's face was as grim as the Sphinx's, and his voice had a sound like that produced by rubbing two stones against each other. He had aged perceptibly during the last year, for trouble and care had been busy at his heart. It had hardened under its load, and he was now, indeed, a pitiless enemy.

"Are you going to rake up that old affair?" wearily asked King.

"I'm goin' ter rake up a new a'fair; that's what I'm goin' ter do. Brinsley Westcourt, whar is Rose?"

"Rose?"

"Yes, Rose."

"What the fiends do I know about her? I am not her keeper."

"I ain't so sure o' that. I b'lieve you kin tell whar she is ef you are so minded."

"You are wrong. I know nothing about the girl."

"What hev you ter say ter that?"

Aaron flung to the ex-judge the slip of paper we have seen him examine on the street; the one which bade him seek tidings of Westcourt and Rose at Straight Flush, of Cortlandt King. The magnate read it at a glance, and would have given a good deal of money to know who had thus betrayed him. He had thought himself secure at this remote town of the Gunnison, but some secret foe had found him out and betrayed him to Aaron.

Who was it?

"Well, what does this rubbish mean?" he coldly asked, preserving his outward composure in spite of all.

"It answers fur itself. I didn't know whar ye was, but some friendly hand sent the information. Now, I'm hyar ter git more information. Whar is Rose?"

Aaron's voice became deeper, harsher and more menacing as he went on, and King plainly saw that he had no light task before him to meet his attack. But on one point he was as innocent as he claimed to be.

"I know nothing of Rose," he replied. "Why do you ask me about her?"

"Because you've stole her," said Aaron, with a break in his voice which was almost a sob. "Because you've put the blight o' your accursed hand on her ez you did on her mother. You sent ther one ter an untimely grave, and now I s'pose you've marked Rose fur ther same fate. Mebbe you've killed her a'ready. Mebbe she lies in a grave in ther bleak mountains, dead—murdered by your hands—her father's hands!"

The old man had worked himself up to a dangerous pitch of fury. His face became purple, and King would not have been surprised to see him fall dead. He wished he would fall thus. There was no safety for Aaron King while Aaron Thomas lived.

"In the name of all that's mysterious, why do you accuse me in the premises? It seems that you don't know where Rose is. Well, neither do I. To that I am willing to swear. What reason have you for believing otherwise? But, wait; this anonymous mess of slime says that you are to seek news of her from me. Is that the only motive for your charge? If so, it is a weak and delusive one. The scrawl is the work of a coward. Aaron Thomas, you and I have had differences, but I swear that I know nothing concerning Rose. I've not seen her since last fall."

"I don't b'lieve it," quickly and stubbornly replied Aaron. "Who should have speerited her away ef not you? Thar has been nothin' but underhand work. When you was ther big man o' Belplain you put us off, an' thus got a chance ter run away. We hunted fur you, but we didn't find ye. So I made a leetle home; a modest cabin in ther mountains; an' left Rose thar. Then I went cut alone ter look fur you, thinking my little girl was safe."

The dusty traveler paused and seemed to swallow an imaginary lump in his throat, but his voice wavered as he proceeded, and the hand which he rested on his knee trembled painfully.

"I became a veritable tramp arter that. I was too poor to travel with bosses or by rail, an' so I footed it. I went ter village arter village, lookin' fur you. I grew hungry-eyed on the trail, an' more than onc't I heerd men whisper that I was crazy—a crank, they called me. P'raps I wa'n't jest in my right mind, but I kept on, swearin' ter find you."

"Why do you tell me this?" uneasily asked King.

"I'm comin' ter that. That was ther way I passed ther winter. By spring I was worn out an' fit ter give up ther ghost an' die where-so I chanced ter be. So I resolved ter go back ter Rose. I went, a weak, shattered old man. I found ther little home ez I left it, but ther was no smoke rising from ther chimbley, an' no fire on ther hearth. My step sounded like ther funeral tap o' a drum when I trod on ther floor. It was deserted; Rose was gone!"

Once more the dusty wanderer paused. He drew his sleeve across his eyes, and tears were left upon it. There were none in the eyes of Cortlandt King. He looked hungrily at Aaron, and longed to strike him down where he sat. He spoke, and his voice was cold and hard; so hard that it steeled Aaron's nature anew.

"Well?"

"Wal," echoed Aaron, hotly, "I've come ter you ter learn o' her. She wouldn't run away an' give no sign ter me. No; it ain't in her soft nature. She never give'd me pain in her life. She was stole; that's what she was; and who should do it but you? What does ther paper say?"

He shook the anonymous note as a dog shakes a bone.

"The paper lies!" declared King.

"No," said Aaron, deeply, "you are ther liar, Brinsley Westcourt!"

A red mist swam before the ex-judge's eyes. How he hated the man before him! The fact that the man was old and gray; that he had within a few months become feeble because of sorrow brought upon him by the judge's own hand; that he was now asking only for his lost niece, did not weigh in the least with Cortlandt King. He hated the man, and his nerves were quivering with an impulse to spring upon and strangle him.

"Be careful!" he said, warningly. "I have borne a good deal from you, but you may carry your abuse too far. Is this the way to secure my help? Am I, a man whom all the world respects, to be brow-beaten by such as you?"

"Ef you are so much respected, why do you find it necessary ter hide in this small town under a false name?" retorted Aaron.

"That is my business, not yours. But why should we quarrel? Do you know where Dane Templeton is?"

"No."

"From what he has said," continued King, assuming a thoughtful air, "I more than half suspect he may know where Rose is."

Aaron looked at him sharply.

"Is Templeton hyar now?"

"He's in the village, but he's no friend of mine. He is bitter against me because I refused to let him marry Miriam," explained King, and though his statement was entirely a concoction, he unconsciously told a good deal of truth. "Yes, he is down on me, and, as such is the case, I do not see why I shouldn't do him an ill turn. He has several times referred to Rose in a peculiar way which led me to suspect he knew where she was, and intended to help her against me. By George, I believe there is something in it. Rose may even now be in Straight Flush, working against me with Templeton's aid."

The magnate spoke with the air of one who half-unconsciously speaks his thoughts aloud, and simple-minded Aaron fell into the trap.

"Where is Templeton? Direct me whar he lives," he said, quickly.

"I will. I admit that I have no love for Rose, but I have not decoyed or stolen her away, nor do I know where she is. Let there be peace between us until I have convinced you of that, and then I'll fight you to the bitter end in court. But I'll prove that I am no woman-stealer!"

King spoke with the air of one who has an irreproachable reputation to maintain, and as he talked he hustled around and put on his hat and coat. While doing so he slipped beneath his coat a bronze image of Cupid, which had adorned his desk. It was a singular proceeding, for what could he want of Cupid during the visit they were about to make?

Perhaps Aaron would have asked the same

question had he seen Cupid buttoned up in King's coat, but he saw nothing of the kind.

"Come!" he said. "Darkness is falling, and we shall be just in time to catch Templeton, I think."

They went out together, but in silence. Aaron did not once suspect danger, and all his thoughts were of Rose. Was he really going to find her at last? If she was found, he would never lose sight of her again. What King thought need not be told; but his hand rested on his coat, keeping Cupid in place, and a dark expression was on his face.

He took a course to suit himself, and his companion followed for some time in silence. Finally, however, the elder man aroused from meditation.

"Where are we goin'?" he asked. "We're leavin' ther village."

"Templeton's cabin is over the brow of this knoll, near the Brown Bear mine. This is the shortest way; it is but a step."

"Go on, then."

Cortlandt King went on, and as he went he cautiously removed the image of Cupid from his coat. Grasping the god of love by the waist, he held him like a club. The darkness concealed the great man's face, and it was well for him that it did so. The face bore a most murderous expression, and from between the parted lips his white teeth gleamed evilly. Suddenly he paused. They had reached a wild spot where bushes and trees were all about them, and King drew a deep, hissing breath as he clutched Cupid still tighter.

"Step just in front of me, Aaron," he said, in a low voice, "and you can see the light from Templeton's cabin. Stand just in front of me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CUPID'S DARKEST DEED.

AARON was too much interested in thinking of Rose to notice the peculiar inflection of Cortlandt King's voice, or to see anything suspicious in the direction to stand in front of his companion. He stepped to the place indicated, and then looked down the hill to see the light.

He never saw it.

The chance which King desired had come. His right hand rose above his head, still grasping the image of Cupid, and then he struck with all his force.

The novel weapon descended straight and true, and as Aaron received that blow on his head, he uttered a groan and dropped to the ground. Whether he was stunned can never be known, for King, roused to a pitch of wild excitement, bent over him and rained other blows upon his head. He did not stop until he felt exhausted, partly by his efforts and partly because of his nervous excitement.

Then he stood still and looked down on the silent form.

"It's done!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Life is gone out of him, and he will never worry me further. It was his own fault; he pursued me like a bloodhound. Now I am safe. Safe? No; not while this body remains to bear witness against me."

He glanced nervously around, as though fearing that hostile eyes had seen his work, but no one was visible and all was still about him. One thing was certain, however; he must get rid of the still form which lay at his feet. Night might hide his crime, but day would not. The body must be secreted.

He thrust the image of Cupid into his pocket and dragged what was left of Aaron behind a rock. Then he looked for a place where he could inter the remains. He found a recess; a natural hollow; which was just what he wanted, and to this place he conveyed the body.

His facilities for acting the grave-digger were limited, but he placed brush and stones upon the mute witness of his crime and piled over all such earth as he could loosen with a flat stone which he used as a spade.

"That will do," he said, at last, standing erect and wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "No one will think of looking here, and, to-morrow night, I will come with a spade and pile on more dirt. The deed is done, and I must save myself. I don't think I am so very much to blame; he forced it upon me."

He was trying to excuse himself, but he suffered all the fears of what may be called the amateur murderer. He had been a hard man, but never before had he deliberately slain one of his fellow-men. He was now feverishly nervous. He started at the rustling of a leaf, and dared not look at the impromptu grave after the work was done. He fancied that the white face of Aaron would be visible, mutely accusing him of the darkest of deeds known to man. His usually steady hands were trembling, and his haughty face was like that of a man being led to the gallows.

"No one will find it out," he muttered, trying to give himself courage. "The old man had no friends here, and no one will inquire for him. I have only to keep quiet, and he will lie undisturbed until the final trumpet blows."

His hand strayed to his pocket and he took out his deadly weapon, the image of Cupid. He passed his fingers over it, and then suddenly started.

Cupid's head was missing.

The frail stuff of which the image was made had been unable to withstand the strain put upon it, and it had broken at the neck. Where was the head? King felt in his pocket. It was not there. No; of course not. It had in all probability broken when he was dealing those murderous blows on his victim. The head must be where Aaron was struck down.

He looked for it there. He did not at once find it, and he went down on his knees and searched carefully. It would never do to leave it there. The people of Straight Flush were not addicted to the possession of bric-a-brac or useless ornament, and he felt sure that no other house in the young town could boast of a bronze image. If it became known that there was a dead man on the hillside, and that he had been killed with an image of Cupid, it would not be hard to trace Cupid to Cortlandt King's house.

So this gray-haired man, who had been a judge and cattle-king, at Belplain, and who was a railroad president at Straight Flush, crept about on his knees, pale and fearful, his hands feeling here and there for Cupid's head.

He did not find it.

He was at last forced to adopt the theory that the statue had broken at the first blow, and that the missing part had rolled some distance away. To find it in that wild spot by night seemed impossible, and he abandoned the idea, resolving to return at an early hour in the morning and secure it.

Next, he buried what was left of Cupid in a recess under a rock, and then went to a stream of water and washed his face and hands, rearranging his disordered clothing as well as possible. He feared there was blood on the garments, and he was anxious to get home and settle that point.

He went, striving to regain his usual calmness as he moved along. Not for all the wealth of Colorado would he have Miriam suspect the dark deed he had committed.

It seemed one point gained when he entered the house without meeting his daughter or the servants. He went at once to what he called his office. A light was burning there, but that did not surprise him, as it was a part of the servant's duty to light the room every evening at dark, whether he was there or not; and it was a complete surprise when he saw a stranger sitting near the safe.

King paused in apprehension. Was there anything in his personal appearance to betray to the stranger the dark deed done on the hill-side?

The stranger arose politely.

"Mr. Cortlandt King, is it not?"

The magnate choked down the lump in his throat.

"That is my name, sir. Have you business with me? I am very busy, and perhaps you had better defer it until to-morrow."

"It's a matter which will occupy but a moment, sir. I wish to see Aaron Thomas!"

King's face paled, and his eyes grew wild.

"I do not know any such man," he rashly answered.

"Not know Thomas?" cried the stranger, in surprise. "Why, I should say you ought to know him, considering that he claims to be your brother-in-law."

King bit his lips angrily.

"I spoke in a figurative sense, or whatever you choose to call it. Of course I know who Thomas is, but I do not acknowledge acquaintance with him. I repudiate him. As to his present whereabouts, I've not seen him since last fall."

The stranger looked freshly surprised, and then his face assumed an expression Cortlandt King did not like in the least.

"There is something very odd here. Thomas and I came to Straight Flush together; I gave him a lift from Bitter Creek; and when we parted, I went at once to the hotel and secured a room for him, out of pity for his poverty. Having done this, the fancy struck me to let him know the fact at once, and I hurried after him. Had nearly overtaken him when I saw him enter this house. Now, you say he has not been here. This is very odd!"

The speaker's peculiar expression showed that he also thought it suspicious, and perspiration started out on King's forehead.

"I also remember," continued the man, "that when I said to Thomas that he ought to get a warm welcome, if you were his brother-in-law, he said you were less likely to give him quarters than to murder him. I don't suppose you have murdered him, have you?"

The blunt question drove King almost to the pitch of frenzy. The old claim that "Murder will out," seemed proved with a promptness both startling and terrible. What was he to do? Plainly, he would not be safe while this keen-eyed stranger lived. *While he lived!* King wished him as dead as was Aaron, and he looked around for a weapon. There was no second statue of Cupid, but as the stranger half-unconsciously rested one hand on the sofa, an idea occurred to the ex-judge.

Whether it was practicable he had no time to decide; he must act, not meditate.

He grasped the bell-cord and pulled it with a tremendous jerk, which sent an alarm through the house, and brought a muscular servant, who chanced to be passing the door, at once inside. King's face flushed with triumph.

"Seize that man!" he ordered; "I caught him trying to force open the safe."

The stranger had arisen at the imperious pull of the bell, and he now faced his accuser with flashing eyes.

"Sir!" he cried, "how dare you make such an infamous accusation?"

"I dare do anything to a burglar. Ben, he was trying to steal the funds of the railroad. Seize him!"

"Keep off!" ordered the stranger. "I will not submit to—"

His hand had sought his hip-pocket, evidently to draw a revolver, but his slowness seemed to show that he was no Western man. "Ben" was, and he flung himself on the stranger with remarkable celerity. Then a stubborn struggle began. The stranger was muscular, but King came to his man's aid, and the fight could have but one end. He was secured, and handcuffs, which King chanced to have, slipped upon his wrists. He stood panting but defiant.

"We will take him to prison," said King.

"Beware!" cried the stranger. "I begin to see a little of your desperate plot, but I warn you it will not work. Release me, or by my life, I will tell all—"

"He shall be gagged," interrupted the magnate, well knowing what he would tell if he could. "Stuff this scarf in his mouth, Ben!"

The order was promptly obeyed, and the dangerous stranger was for a time deprived of the power of speech.

"We must take him to jail at once. The stockholders of the S. F. & V. don't want their money stolen."

"That they don't, sir," replied Ben, who did not for a moment suspect that the crookedness in the case lay at Cortlandt King's door.

They left the house with the stranger held between them and marched him down the street. He resisted no more, but his eyes were turned on King with an expression which spoke volumes. It was not needed, however, to make the latter understand that he must move quickly in order to save himself. The stranger must not be allowed to talk.

He was thrust into a secure room in the jail, and then King hurried out. At the very door he met Kyle Kirby,

"Kirby," he said, tersely, "what ought to be done to a man if he tried to steal the funds of the S. F. & V.?"

"He ought to be lynched!" Kyle promptly declared.

"Well, such an attempt has been made, and I've just shut the man up inside. I am of your way of thinking, and I advise you to get the boys together and give the scoundrel a quick and everlasting send-off!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

JUDGE LYNCH, OF STRAIGHT FLUSH.

THE news ran through the village like wildfire. Each man and woman who heard it hastened to tell his, or her, neighbor that a man had been caught robbing the safe which contained the funds of the Straight Flush & Valley road, and then nearly every inhabitant turned out.

Such Western miners as are honest are never noted for their love of rascals, and they had a vivid way of disposing of law-breakers without the expense of jury, or any other judge than that world-renowned one, Judge Lynch, whose fame has eclipsed that of any other officer who ever sat on the bench.

But, in the present case, the miners were but a weak factor. They were pushed aside, and their loudest cries were drowned by those made by the stockholders of the S. F. & V.

The latter were like hungry wolves. When it was noised abroad that a man had tried to rob the safe they fairly went wild. All their worldly funds were in that safe; it represented the road and their own future; and they thirsted to tear the robber in pieces.

Cortlandt King marked all this and breathed freer. He carefully fed the incipient blaze until it became a devouring conflagration. Who the prisoner was he did not know, but he did know that if he was permitted to speak he would make matters very dangerous for Cortlandt King, Esquire, so the magnate fed the flames persistently. He told a very pretty story of his defense of the safe, and the mob stopped cursing the alleged robber now and then to cheer their devoted and heroic president.

It was the latter himself who furnished a rope, for he had Aaron and Cupid always in his mind, and dreaded the effect of delay, and he breathed freer when the mob was ready for work.

"Hang him as he is, handcuffed and gagged," he said to Kyle Kirby. "We must make this night's work a warning to desperadoes. The habit of giving a condemned man a chance to address the crowd betrays childlike weakness on the side of the law. Let evil-doers see we give

their stripe no mercy. Hang your man as he is, and my word for it, no one else will tamper with our safe."

Every word went home. King had chosen just the words to impress his excited followers, and though they did not seem so very appropriate to him, they did seem so to them.

And they proceeded to raid the jail.

"I don't think no more burglars or such will interfere with their funds o' the S. F. & V. We give that feller a lesson, an' I reckon it'll prove salutarius ter others."

The speaker was Kyle Kirby, and as he spoke he tossed off a glass of whisky in time with several companions.

It was over. The stranger had met Judge Lynch and "suffered the extreme penalty of"—what? Not the law, for he had died without a trial. He had suffered the extreme penalty of daring the revenge of a desperate man. Cortlandt King had passed one danger; the stranger would never breathe his suspicion that Aaron Thomas had met with foul play at the hands of the magnate of Straight Flush. He had tried hard to speak before the lynchers did their work, but the scarf stuffed in his mouth had prevented it.

What was his name? No one knew. He had been an utter stranger in Straight Flush, and his lips had not revealed anything; they never would. He hung dangling from a tree near the outskirts of the village, forever done with men's hates and passions.

The hours crept on. Straight Flush grew calm. Even the excited railroad men remembered that it was the hour of sleep; they sought their beds, and there was quiet in the village. Midnight came and went, and two hours followed it.

The victim of Judge Lynch is alone. The wind slightly moves the lifeless form, but no human being seems near. Wait! There is a rattling, as of a loose stone, and then a man comes out of the darkness and pauses at the foot of the tree. He bears a ladder on his shoulder, but seems in no haste to use it. He looks up at the still form. The few visible stars look down solemnly upon the scene. The wind moans through the gulch, as though more pitiful than the hearts of men. Even the grim rocks, half-concealed by night, might be said to have put on mourning robes.

The man with the ladder placed his burden against the tree and ascended the rungs. He reached the large limb over which hung the rope, loosened a knot, went down and untied the extreme end of the rope, and then lowered the body. He felt of pulse and heart, and then flung the heavy burden easily over his shoulder and moved away, showing unusual strength.

He entered the gulch and proceeded for a hundred yards. Then, when the soil grew sandy, he laid his burden down. From a recess in the cliff he took a lantern, the light of which had been muffled, and cast its glimmer on the face of the deceased.

As he did so his own face was brought into light.

Black Barb Brennan stood revealed.

He stood like a statue for a few seconds, and then began muttering.

"You've seen ther cend, Crow McKittrick, an' it's a right good man that is gone. It's a curious life we lead anyhow, an' ez you had rid five year on ther Overland I never tho'rt you was goin' ter yer death when I axed ye ter come ter Straight Flush. We don't know when we'll pull up. You could pick a pocket, cut a throat, or wreck a train ekul ter any man that e'er folled me, an' now you've gone out like a candle. How? Who did it? Who, but Brinsley Westcourt. Crow, cl'd boyee, Black Barb never deceived ye, an' when he sw'ars that your slayer shall pay ther debt you kin jest bet yer boots he means business!"

The wrecker's manner was quiet, but there was a depth to all that he said which showed how much in earnest he was. The dead man and he had rode on many a lawless expedition, and Barb had never had a more faithful follower. He had asked him to come to Straight Flush, and he had come to his death.

Brennan fully intended that the parties responsible for the lynching should pay eye for eye, and nail for nail.

He produced a spade and hewed out a shallow grave, wherein he laid what was mortal of Crow McKittrick and covered it over with sand. The dead outlaw would have no marble tombstone, but a projection of rock marked where he rested and the mighty cliff made a headstone likely to last for centuries.

His old leader was preparing to go away when something wholly unexpected occurred.

"Halt, Barb Brennan!"

The words sounded distinctly enough, but the gulch had a curious echo, and the wrecker could not tell from whence came the voice. He stood still and looked sharply around, his hand on his revolver.

"Why did you dig my grave so shallow?" continued the voice.

Brennan rallied.

"Wal, I'll be blamed ef I knowed I had dug yer grave," he retorted, "but ef you want ter

be buried bad, come this way an' I'll kiver ye up with care."

"I am the spirit of Crow McKittrick."

"Ther blazes you be!" said Barb, who had no element of superstition. "Wal, ther best thing you kin do is ter tramp along with yer body an' keep out o' ther wet."

"You've buried my body that I can't reach it."

"Oh! hev I? Wal, waltz this way, an' I'll loan ye my spade so ye kin dig it up."

"Barb Brennan, the grave is too shallow."

"Look-a-hyar now, don't ye go ter kickin' ag'in' my system o' grave-diggin'. Mebbe ye want Hamblett's chief sexton an' skull-orator ter give ye a 'rastocratic plantin'. Ef so, hunt him up, but don't kick ag'in' my system, or I'll lay ye out wuss than yer body was laid."

Barb spoke freely, but he was far from being at ease. He had designed to keep out of sight while at Straight Flush, for he was not a popular man since his career on the Overland, and now it seemed that one man, at least, knew he was near the town. The man was very well informed, too, for he not only called him by name, but knew Crow McKittrick as well. Such a person was dangerous. Barb, revolver in hand, tried to locate him, but the echo was as bewildering as before and he could tell nothing. That he was talking with Crow's ghost, or any other disembodied spirit, Barb was too sensible to believe. What he wanted was to use a bullet on the "ghost."

"I say the grave is too shallow. You should have made it deep, Barb Brennan, and wide enough for two. You will want half of it yourself in a few days. You are a doomed man, and your days are numbered. Why did you dig the grave so shallow?"

"Now you jest look hyar, Mister Man," retorted Brennan, "thar's been enough o' cheap talk. Ef you're half a man, you'll come out an' show yerself. Ef ye ain't, why keep out o' sight an' call yerself a calf. Ther ghost biz won't go down my neck; you're a human ez much ez I be. I'll give ye a minute ter come out an' show yerself. Ef ye don't appear then, I'm off."

"I am a spirit and cannot go to you, but you shall come to me. Beware, Barb Brennan, for your days are numbered. Better dig the grave deeper and prepare for death."

The wrecker did not answer, but, believing he had located the voice, grasped his revolver tighter and glided down the gulch. He had a fixed purpose in his mind. This mysterious man who knew him so well was no friend of his, and he was resolved to make it exceedingly hot for him if he could be found.

He went as far as the point where the cliff turned to a steep slope, and then began toiling upward. He was experienced and hardy, and soon stood on the summit. Then he dropped to his hands and knees and began creeping along, keeping a sharp watch.

"Ef I git my eye on him, I'll bore ther critter like a sieve," he muttered, the old, fierce mood upon him.

But when he gained the place from whence the voice had seemed to come no living creature besides himself was visible, and he paused in perplexity for a moment. Then he moved on, but in a moment almost fell over some object which lay in his path. He put down his hand and touched it, and then quickly struck a match.

He recoiled at what he saw.

"Lope Grigston! By ther fiends, what demon is let loose 'mongst my men? Another gone! Who killed him? ay, I say, who killed him?"

He had raised his voice to a high pitch, but there was no answer. He was stirred out of his usual cool mood and, rising, he rushed along the edge of the cliff, hoping to see some one upon whom he could vent his wrath.

He had barely gone when another man emerged from a recess among the rocks, looked after him and then laughed in a low, unpleasant way.

"Much good may your search do you. I am on your trail, Barb Brennan, and I'll make your stay at Straight Flush a warm one. You've come here to play the scourge, but I'll give you enough work to do in the defensive line. I'll see you later!"

And with another unpleasant laugh, the speaker strode away in a direction exactly opposite to the one taken by Brennan.

His cloak and slouched hat are not new to us. In him we recognize the Horned Dragon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NEW HONORS FOR GREFWILDE.

THAT night was not a peaceful one for Cortlandt King. True, he retired at a respectably early hour, but it was long before he slept. He had that evening taken a degree in crime which he had never expected to take, and it had been forced upon him without any previous warning. In his grave on the hillside Aaron Thomas slept the eternal sleep, and the death of the man doomed by Judge Lynch was just as much at King's door.

He had protected himself at a terrible cost.

But was he protected?

He had an ever-active fear that the death of Aaron would become known; that the rude

grave would be discovered and its occupant revealed; that Cupid's head would be found, blood-stained and broken, and be made a witness against him; or that there had been some witness of his dark deed, hidden in the bushes.

Carefully he inspected his garments for guilty stains, and, finding none, laid them down only to soon go over them again.

His fears were ever on the alert.

Finally he went to bed. It was long before he slept, and when he did, dreams not unlike those of Richard III. haunted his troubled slumber; Aaron, the lynched man and the image of Cupid being strangely mixed. His fears that the missing head might cause trouble made it assume great importance in his dreams. Once he dreamed that he disinterred Aaron's body and found that his head was gone, and that of Cupid attached instead; again, Aaron's head was on Cupid's body; and yet again, he was arrested, tried and executed for killing Cupid, on the testimony of the man who was lynched. It was a wretched night.

In the morning Mr. King took an early walk. He went to the hillside. He found Aaron's grave apparently as he had left it, but his most careful search failed to discover Cupid's head. He looked in every niche and corner among the bushes, but all to no purpose. This lack of success frightened him, for he argued that some one else must have found it, and in his professional capacity as a judge he had known men to be suspected on even less evidence than a head of Cupid, and hanged.

But a new theory finally quieted him somewhat.

Might he not, in some way, have buried the missing part of the statue with Aaron?

Such a thing was very possible, and he tried to rest easy, but then followed an unhealthy longing to disinter the body and settle the question, coupled with a shrinking from the idea which was even stronger.

No; not for any money would he open the grave and see the face of his victim.

He returned to the house and tried to busy himself with his papers, while awaiting the railroad meeting, which had been changed to that afternoon, but he separated short periods of work with long periods of meditation, during which the hillside tragedy was again enacted in imagination.

Before noon he was seized with a morbid impulse to once more visit the place, and he did so, looking at the grave and searching for Cupid's head.

He was glad when noon passed and a time of active work approached. He expected considerable opposition to the election of Peter Grefwilde as treasurer of the S. F. & V., and rather hoped it would be so.

A good fight would stir up his sluggish blood and, possibly, dispel the fears which beset him.

Grefwilde called around in due time, with his blue goggles on his nose and his note-book under his arm. He was in good spirits, for he had that forenoon actually obtained two subscribers to the History of the Gunnison, the same to be accompanied with portraits and two hundred dollars each.

One of his subscribers was the bootblack at the Rest-for-Weary-Bones Hotel, whose portrait he wanted because he was young and sharp; the other was the negress who scrubbed the floor, whose portrait he wanted because she was said to be over a hundred years old. As both these people could not have scraped up fifty dollars, much less four hundred, the landlord had dubiously observed that he feared the historian would never see the color of his money; whereupon, Mr. Grefwilde laid his finger close to his nose, twisted his mouth to one side and replied:

"My dear sir, I should not be in this business if I were not able to draw blood from a turnip!"

And then he came over to see Cortlandt King in equally good spirits.

"I have my speech all prepared," he said, serenely. "What I don't know about railroading is not worth knowing. I have it down fine from rails to locomotives; from car-wheels to water-boys. I am able to tell what the great Eastern roads have tried; what they have found successful and unsuccessful."

"And I suppose your information is as accurate as are your histories," said King, significantly.

"Just about," was the quiet reply.

They went to the meeting and found the stockholders there in force. The majority of them were rough fellows like Kyle Kirby, but the fact that each one had five thousand dollars in the S. F. & V. proved that they had not failed to lay by a share of their past earnings.

And all hoped to become rich out of the new enterprise.

King helped Grefwilde to get possession of Kirby, and that gentleman was soon under the full fascination of the historian. The latter was enthusiastic over the prospects of the road, and as Kyle did not know all those interested in the road, he was not surprised to hear that Grefwilde was one of them. The latter talked fluently about railroads and his history of the Gunnison.

"Although we charge two hundred dollars as

a rule for the insertion of a portrait, I shall enter three of the leading men of Straight Flush free of charge—Mr. King, yourself and Moses Appleby. I was a little uncertain whom to select for my third man, but I reckon Appleby is a fair choice, don't you?"

Honest Kyle beamingly said he did. The fact that he was the second distinguished man on the list had pleased him immensely, and from that time he was the historian's fast friend.

Business proceedings began. Elaborate certificates of stock had just been received in blank form from Leadville, and these were properly filled out with the names of the several holders. A comprehensive system of bookkeeping was also adopted.

Next came the election of officers.

Cortlandt King was made president by acclamation.

Then Kyle Kirby arose and proposed Grefwilde for vice-president.

Mr. King quickly arose and suggested that Grefwilde ought to be treasurer. His long experience in similar posts in the East eminently qualified him for the office. The gentleman also had the most advanced information and ideas about railroads—would Mr. Grefwilde favor them with a few remarks on the subject?

Mr. Grefwilde would and did. He made a remarkable speech. He showed himself a close friend of all the railway kings of the East. He revealed the fact that he knew just how all the great roads were operated. He explained why the cars of Chickory & Playfair were the best and cheapest in the world, and exposed the false pretenses of Poorman & Slow's work. He also talked learnedly of rails, locomotives, head-lights, signals and frogs.

By the time he finished it was clear to every one it was a direct gift from Providence that Peter Grefwilde had come to Straight Flush.

He too was elected by acclamation.

King breathed freely. He had won the point for which he had schemed; the treasurer of the road was a man of his own selection; and he cared not a picayune for the other officers.

Who were elected he hardly knew.

That afternoon's work restored the wavering confidence in Mr. King. It was unanimously agreed that he had acted like a gentleman, and had no more to do with the several elections than the humblest of them all.

But the magnate laughed as he and Grefwilde walked homeward.

"That was a great speech of yours. Where did you get your points?"

"Out of my 'History of Railways,'"

"Where did you get your points for the history?"

"From a lively imagination."

"What part of your imagination was founded on fact?"

"The title-page."

Mr. King laughed again. It was clear that he had secured an assistant who was a man after his own heart.

"You will now become an inmate of my own house and, practically, a member of my own family. I think we shall work harmoniously together as officials of the S. F. & V."

"No doubt of it, for our views seem to be similar."

"Exactly."

King was not sure of it, but he hoped it would prove so. It was his purpose to make all he could out of the road, and he hoped to find a pliant tool in Grefwilde. If he did, the other holders of stock might some day find themselves left in the lurch.

Both men went to King's house, and the historian was formally installed in a comfortable room. He complied with the invitation to make himself at home, without any timidity. Descending to the lower part of the house soon after, he met Miriam. The latter had received particular instructions from her father to be cordial to the treasurer, and she politely expressed a hope that he would find his new quarters pleasant.

"There isn't any doubt about it," Peter gallantly replied. "How can it be otherwise when you are in the house? I have two eyes in my head, though these goggles, which I wear to soften the light, might lead one to think otherwise; and I know a charming woman when I see one."

"I am afraid the class is not represented at Straight Flush," Miriam replied, not so very much displeased.

"By Jove! if you could see yourself as others see you, you would not say that!" Grefwilde declared.

"I am afraid historians are prone to flattery."

"Constant association with truth makes it impossible for them to tell a lie," Miss King.

"Well, I hope we shall be friends."

"Of course we shall. My opinion of you is already formed, as you have seen, and I usually create a good impression when I set out to do so on strictly business principles."

Miriam laughed, for Grefwilde's radical egotism somehow seemed to be so good-humored as to be excusable. It was so much a part of his brisk, bustling, self-confident way that it seemed more a part of his peculiar business than of the man, himself.

Before she could reply, however, both became aware that a man had stopped before the window and was regarding them closely. He at once passed on when he saw that he was observed, but not so soon but they had seen the ugly scowl on his face.

"An amiable looking cut-throat," Grefwilde observed. "He reminds me of Captain Kidd—but you probably never met Kidd. Do you know this scowler from Scowltown?"

"His name is Dane Templeton," replied Miriam, slowly, a troubled look on her face. "He looked as though he would like to slaughter us. Would like his portrait in my book as the condensed cut-throat of the Gunnison."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK FROM THE GRAVE.

NIGHT!

A horse's feet rung on the hard soil, and a man came riding through a gulch which led to Straight Flush. It was at present the only way of reaching the town, but men looked forward to the time when they would be connected with Bludsoe by means of Cortlandt King's railroad, and those who had to ride in the saddle now did so with a degree of philosophy.

The rider of the horse to which attention has been directed, however, was not in a philosophic mood. His face was gloomy and troubled, and he was giving little heed to matters by the way.

It was John Loring. He was travel-stained and weary, having been away for some time, and he anticipated no pleasure from his return.

So deeply was he immersed in thought, he did not hear the sound of a second horse's steps behind him, and wholly surprised when a voice addressed him from the darkness.

"Wait a moment, John Loring!"

The conductor quickly reined in his horse. Recalled to real life, he suddenly remembered his opinion that he had a hot-bed of enemies at Straight Flush, and it was by no means certain that some of them did not intend to summarily send him over the divide, then and there.

He drew a revolver and faced to the rear.

"Who speaks?" he demanded.

"A friend. I don't care to shout my name, so, with your leave, I'll come closer before divulging. I'm a friend, however."

Despite this assurance, John eyed him closely, the darkness preventing him from discovering whether the unknown was really familiar of face. About the voice there certainly was an old-time sound.

The second horseman drew up beside him.

"Don't you know me, Loring?"

"Can't say I do."

"Turn your thoughts backward."

"How far?"

"To the grave!" was the laughing reply. "I am commonly called a dead man; my obituary has been published broadcast; and yet, I am alive and well."

"By George! if it wasn't impossible, I should think—"

"What?"

"That you are David Braceridge!"

"Think so freely, for I am Braceridge. Oh, I'm solid flesh; just feel of my hand."

And as Loring put out his own member mechanically, it was seized in a decidedly substantial grasp.

"I don't understand," he said, confusedly. "I could have sworn you were killed the night Brennan wrecked my train in Hickhack Gap. True, we never found your body, but it was supposed to have fallen into Arrow Run and been lost."

"Well, I did go into the Run, with a bullet through my body, but I came out alive. Alive, and no more. I was a badly-injured man, and for a long time I lay in the hut of a lone miner, who was working the hills. I finally recovered, and returned to the world at large. Then it was that I discovered that I was, to all practical purposes, dead and buried, with my obituary properly written up in every newspaper-office in the West."

"So it was," said Loring.

"Well, I was not displeased; on the contrary, I accepted the situation. It seemed to me a special Providence in my favor, for Braceridge, reputed dead and buried, could work to better advantage than Braceridge, expected by every rascal in the West."

"And you have worked in that manner?"

"Yes."

"By George! this is most surprising."

"You hardly realize it yet."

"To tell the truth, I don't. Give me your hand again. There! that feels like flesh and blood. Your grip is like steel. Well, I am sincerely glad to see you, anyway."

There could be no doubt regarding the speaker's sincerity.

"I can say the same. I found so many people who were rogues either from inclination or the force of circumstances, during my campaign at Belplain, that it seemed to me you were the only honest man in the lot."

"Thank you; and that reminds me—I can give you important information."

"Regarding whom?"

"Barb Brennan."

"What of him?"

"He is now in, or near, Straight Flush."

"I am aware of it," calmly replied the detective.

"Ah! Have you arrested him?"

"No; and I shall not at present."

"No?" echoed Loring, considerably surprised.

"No. My long trail to catch him has assumed a new form of late, and as I feel sure of my victim, I shall give him freedom for a while yet. One of these days I'll make a seizure worth having to my credit. He is not the only crooked fellow here."

"Of that I am well aware," said the conductor, gloomily. "Do you know that Cain Magruder is here?"

"Yes, and it is of him I wish to speak. I wish you to bury the hatchet with him."

"Never!" declared Loring.

"Why not?"

"Because I hate him. You remember Rose Thomas, don't you? But of course you do, and you must also recollect that she was to be my wife. She never will be that. Magruder has practiced his arts upon her, and they are married."

"They are not married," coolly replied Braceridge.

"But I have seen the record of their marriage."

"Exactly. You were sent to Crested Butte to look for it, and you found it. Of course you did. You would not have been sent there had not the proof been manufactured in advance. I know who sent you; it was the fellow who calls himself the Horned Dragon. But do you know why he sent you?"

"No."

"It was because he hated Templeton, and wanted to set you against him. The Horned Dragon is playing a big game. He wants to freeze Cortlandt King out of Straight Flush; he is playing the red slayer on Brennan's band, and he lied to you about Rose. I am rather ashamed of you, John. Why will you think evil of her? She is not married to Templeton or any one else."

"Then what is she doing at Straight Flush?"

"Seeking justice of Brinsley Westcourt, *alias* Cortlandt King. Meg Brennan is helping her, and as Cain Magruder wishes to ruin, or blackmail, King, common interests have formed them all into a combination against that man. It was their game to prevent the building of the railroad; but now comes Barb Brennan, who wants the road built, and they will give way to him."

"By George, you have the matter down fine."

"I have," coolly answered the detective; "so fine that I must ask two favors of you. The first is, believe me when I swear that what the Horned Dragon told you is a lie, and make up with Rose."

Loring hesitated.

"Come, can't you trust me?"

"I believe I can."

"Of course you can. Now for the second favor."

"What is it?"

"You must be a conductor on King's road."

Loring laughed.

"That will never be. The ex-judge hates me cordially."

"Yet, he will give you the position if you will take it. I will pull all the wires and see that it is done."

"Braceridge, in the name of all that's wonderful, what game are you playing here at Straight Flush?"

"A winning one. All my rogues of the Belplain affair are once more together, and as they think me dead, and each one has a game to play here, as well as myself, here they will stay. One of these fine days I'll gather 'em in. I can't divulge fully, but are you willing to take the word of a friend and help me all you can?"

"Blindfolded?"

"For the present, yes."

Loring hesitated. He felt that a good deal was being asked of him, but Braceridge had long ago acquired a strong influence over him and, believing fully in the detective's uprightness, he felt that he would run no risk by following his lead.

"Command me!" he tersely replied.

"Very good. And now for a few points. If any man comes to you and says he is named Pixton, trust him. Perhaps you remember the bogus Pixton, at Belplain; a fellow now in State's prison. Brennan's gang had the real Pixton then, but he escaped and has helped me a good bit. Point second: Don't believe a word the Horned Dragon says, but don't do him harm."

"You plunge me deeper into mystery, but I suppose there is no use of asking for daylight. Yet—who is the Horned Dragon?"

"A somewhat remarkable man, who has so many strings to pull that he may often confuse you. He did confuse me at first. I have him down fine now, though I have never spoken with him. I am trying to, however."

"Well, I am all at sea, but I feel sure I can trust you."

"So you can. Now, pay attention to what I say. The once-hostile elements who are here at

Straight Flush—Brennan, his wife, Magruder, Rose and others, will patch up their differences and work to a common end, and as Black Barb is anxious that the building of the railroad should go on, it will go on. There will be quiet at Straight Flush for a month or so, but it will be the hush which precedes the storm, as the old saying goes. When the road gets in operation, Brennan's train-wreckers will make things lively."

"And you want me to be a conductor, and, possibly, get my final smash-up?" laughed Loring.

"We'll speak of that later. What I want now is for you to believe in Rose Thomas and relieve her anxiety."

"I'll do it."

"Good. Keep an eye open for Brennan, for he may try to make hard lines for you. Beware of him! His path won't be one of roses, though, for the Horned Dragon is after him sharply. Do you know Peter Grefwilde?"

"No."

"He is a sharp knave who works for Cortlandt King, but if you drop on any of his crooked ways, just let him go his gait. This pair of rogues may yet fall out. But where is Aaron Thomas?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Nor I. I would give a good deal to know, for I want him to live to see Rose's final triumph, and I am not sure but he's in trouble. But I shall have to bid you good-night now. I am laying for the Horned Dragon, with whom I wish to have a talk. Go you to your hotel and be as prudent as possible. Trust in me. I may seldom be visible to you, but I shall be on the watch. We must arrange a secret post-office where we can communicate with each other undiscovered. Wait!—we will arrange it to-night. Go you to your hotel and leave your horse, and then return here."

Loring readily agreed and rode on to the village. His horse was soon stabled, and then he returned to where he had left Braceridge. The latter had disappeared, and Loring settled down to await his reappearance. A few minutes had passed when the champing of a bit directed his attention to a recess in the cliff. He went to the place and found the detective's horse secured to a spur of rock, but there was no sign of his master.

The moon, which had been concealed, suddenly broke forth from a cloud and, looking upward, the conductor saw two men on the brink of the opposite cliff.

One of them he at once recognized as Braceridge, while the muffled appearance of the other suggested the idea that he was the mysterious Horned Dragon.

The manner of the latter was decidedly hostile. He was on the alert and his gestures were threatening, and, though Braceridge stood calm and unmoved, the weather could but feel that something unpleasant was liable to occur.

His presentiment was speedily realized. The Horned Dragon suddenly bounded forward and seized his companion, and then began a fierce struggle on the verge of the cliff. From the first there was no doubt regarding the intention of the man of mystery; he was endeavoring to throw the detective over the rocky platform.

Loring stood motionless with horror. A fall from that elevated point meant sure death, and it seemed as though one, or both, of them was to meet that fate. As they trampled vigorously about they were always dangerously near the edge.

The watcher would have gone to his friend's aid, but he knew that the struggle would be over long before he could make the necessary detour and ascend to the plateau.

No; they must settle it between themselves.

Suddenly they disappeared from view; so suddenly that it seemed the work of magic, and Loring half-unconsciously rubbed his eyes. Where were they? Neither had fallen, and it was not likely they had gone up in the air. They had receded from the brink of the cliff. Were they still fighting, or had death come to one of them?

Loring kept his gaze fixed on the scene of battle. Dead silence reigned all around him except for the low murmuring of the wind through the gulch. The silence was oppressive. He felt ill at ease and nervous. What had happened on the cliff?

The sound of a脚步声 was a welcome relief, and, looking up, he saw Braceridge striding toward him, evidently none the worse for the struggle.

But what of the Horned Dragon?

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GENTLE HISTORIAN EXHIBITS "SAND."

DAYS passed, and work on the Straight Flush & Valley railroad went on rapidly; in fact, it had never progressed so favorably as since Peter Grefwilde became treasurer. From the time he assumed the duties of his office he became a power in the management, and he spurred on the manual laborers as though they were hired by the day, instead of being stockholders; and had he not been such a favorite his

associates might have charged that he was assuming absolute control of the whole affair.

But he was a favorite with all. He had gained the good will of the men, and they never worked more cheerfully than when he stood over them, long, black coat, tall, rusty hat, goggles, note-book and all.

To Cortlandt King he made himself invaluable. He was willing to work, and did work well, but he always gave respectful attention to his superior and coincided with his views.

Each day saw an increase of King's opinion that he had secured just the man he needed. There were suspicious transactions in the little room where stood the company's safe; transactions planned by King, and open to criticism; but if Grefwilde saw any crookedness he gave no sign.

To whatever the president proposed the treasurer gave ready consent and aid.

In the house, the historian-treasurer made himself felt. Every person was brought under his influence. He held long interviews with the servants, note-book in hand, and though none of them at first knew who his, or her, great-grandfather had been, Peter had succeeded in establishing a genealogy for each one, running back to the Middle Ages, and beginning with a feudal castle, a lovely maiden, a gallant knight, a tourney and other accompaniments; whereat the servants rejoiced and greatly admired Peter.

Miriam liked him, too. She had never analyzed her feelings toward him, but his buoyancy, his audacity and unceasing good-humor had due effect, and he amused her as one is amused by the antics of a clown in a circus.

He had developed an unmistakable business talent as a railroad man, and King, who had laughed when his tool claimed knowledge of such matters, was every day surprised at his real shrewdness.

The future of the S. F. & V. looked promising.

But Cortlandt King was not a happy man. He had never been at ease since the hillside tragedy was enacted, and, at night, his dreams were terribly haunted by visions of Aaron Thomas and Cupid. He had taken a spade to the lone grave and piled on earth until there seemed little danger that Aaron would be found, but he had never been able to find Cupid's head.

This was an ugly fact.

As has before been said, his experience as a judge made him aware that slighter things than this had often led to revelations which brought men to the gallows, and Cupid's head was the nightmare of his existence. Miriam had noticed the absence of the image, compelling him to tell a lie to account for it, and he feared other people might grow inquisitive.

He had searched every foot of ground around the scene of his crime, hoping to find the head, but all in vain. Only two inferences were left; either the head had been found by some one else, or he had buried it in Aaron's grave.

The latter theory kept active the old desire to open the grave and make sure, but he could not bring himself to undergo this trial. As much as he wanted to see Cupid's head, he dared not look upon Aaron's.

But the hillside and the grave possessed an abnormal attraction for him, and not a day passed but he visited the place. He knew this was liable to draw attention to him, and to the hillside, but he could not keep away.

The scene of his crime drew him like a magnet, despite all his efforts to keep away. It had at once an attraction and a repulsion, and the two were strangely and painfully mixed.

One day he entered his office and found Miriam there, putting the place in order; a habit she had assumed since Peter Grefwilde became a sharer of the room a portion of his time. King had just scored a point in business which made him pleased, and he greeted his daughter lightly, and went to his desk in good humor.

Miriam was still watching him, and she grew amazed when she saw him start back with enlarged eyes and pallid cheeks, his whole appearance that of consternation.

"What is it, father?" she cried. "Are you ill?"

King pointed one quivering finger.

"That—that thing!" he stammered.

On his desk stood a bronze image of Cupid, which seemed the same one which had previously stood there, though it was in perfect condition, and he did not doubt the accursed thing which had so often haunted him in his dreams had actually come back to him.

"What do you mean?"

"Cupid!—Cupid! Don't you see? It is back again?"

"Why, that is not the old one. I sent to Bludsoe and bought another like it. I was not going to be deprived of a favorite ornament, so, when you broke the other, I purchased a new one," Miriam explained, wondering at his strange appearance, and equally strange manner.

King endeavored to rally. He saw his mistake, and felt that he had acted very imprudently. He laughed harshly.

"Of course it isn't the old one; I was only joking."

"Father, you were deceiving me."

"Deceiving you?" echoed King, freshly alarmed.

"Yes. The image of Cupid had nothing to do with your emotion. You are ill. What is the matter?"

Happy means of relief! King caught at it at once.

"You are right," he said, placing his hand over his left breast. "I have a trouble with my heart; it caught me then for the third time, but I am well again now. I hoped to turn your attention from it by this mummary about Cupid—ha! ha!—but I did not succeed. Let it pass; I am now well again."

He had satisfactorily cleared himself from suspicion, but he had awakened Miriam's fears, and it was some time before he succeeded in quieting and banishing her from the room. Then, once more alone, he sat looking at the new Cupid with a ferocious scowl.

"Accursed thing!" he muttered, "have you come to haunt and harass me? You seem like the ghost of the other Cupid. Great heavens! I can't sit here day by day and see you standing before me—it would drive me mad. And yet, yet—"

He paused and looked sharply at the image. A suspicion that it was the old one, repaired, had seized him, but the idea was soon abandoned. The neck bore no trace of a fracture. Then his mood changed, and he felt that he would rather have it in his room than not. In fact, his mood changed so often that it indicated a weakened mind; his crime was torturing him always. As for the new Cupid, it began to exert much the same influence as Aaron's grave; it had a mingled attraction and repulsion, and while, at times, he was tempted to break it, he actually took precautions to prevent it from being broken accidentally.

The curse of his crime was growing.

Miriam, after leaving the room, put on her outer garments and left the house also. She had become an admirer of Nature since their coming to Straight Flush, and often visited the ridge back of the house.

A perceptible change had come over her since that dreadful night when the train was wrecked in Hickhack Gap. The high Westcourt pride had received a severe blow. Her elopement with Cain Magruder, or Dane Templeton, or whatever his name was, had ended in her being basely deserted by him, and she had been exposed to many mortifications before she succeeded in rejoining her father.

By that time she was ready to embrace his offer to hide themselves in the Gunnison, and under an assumed name, but it seemed a terrible humiliation for a Westcourt; and under the force of these repeated blows the old, imperious, unreasonable manner of the ex-judge's daughter had changed. She saw many things to regret in the past, and no longer saw such wide gulfs between poor people and rich people.

Having gained a favorite seat under a large tree half a mile from the house, she sat down and began work on an ambitious subject which had occupied her time for a month past—the representation of Straight Flush on canvas.

This task was about as easy as photographing a flea, for nearly every day saw some new cabin erected, and these changes kept her busy. On this occasion she was not destined to do much work; she had just put a chimney upon one of the houses when a footprint sounded and she looked up and saw—Dane Templeton.

Her first impulse was to promptly desert the place; her second, to ignore his presence. She tried the second idea, but Dane smiled in an easy way and was in no wise embarrassed by her coldness.

"I did not know you were an artist, Miriam." No reply.

"Perhaps I should say, Miss King!"

Miriam's pencil moved steadily, but not a word did she speak.

"Come now, let us have done with childishness. I am here to speak with you, and you may as well accept the situation first as last. There was a time when you were not so cold."

"There was a time when I did not know you as well as I do now."

"Granted," said Magruder, carelessly, as he sat down near the girl. "That part is beyond argument, but I do not see why you look upon me with such contempt?"

"I have not forgotten how you deserted me at the time of the railroad wreck at Hickhack Gap."

Cain lifted his brows in assumed surprise.

"Deserted you? By George, you are unjust in making that accusation. When I left you to see what was being done by the fighting men, I ran straight into the wreckers. They were at least six to one, and I was knocked down, robbed and left senseless. When I recovered, you were gone; the second train had come along and taken you and the other passengers away. I was alone and, weak and half-starved, I had to foot it for twenty miles. I arrived half-dead.

I confess I felt bitter against you for leaving me, but I was buoyed up by the thought that you might not have known where I was, and my faith really never wavered until I learned that you had proclaimed that I had deserted

you. Then I did feel bitter, and resolved to keep away from you, but love is king and I am here for a reconciliation. Miriam, are you unforgiving?"

He managed to throw considerable pathos into his voice, but Miriam only smiled coldly.

"You are condemned out of your own mouth. Your version of the affair is all a romance. You did not learn that I had 'proclaimed' your desertion of me, for I told no human being until I rejoined my father. You have overdone your excuse."

Magruder betrayed his annoyance.

"I heard so, at any rate."

"Pardon me, but I cannot believe it."

"You are very airy," he cried, hotly. "Be careful; I will not bear with your foibles as I did once. Stop! Where are you going?"

She had arisen, but he stepped before her.

"Home," she replied, briefly.

"You shall not not go until I have said my say!" he declared, in an ugly way, as he grasped her arm.

Another moment and a vigorous push sent him reeling a dozen feet away, and he would have fallen had he not brought up against a tree.

"Pardon me," said a cool voice, "but Miss King will go where she sees fit and proper."

Magruder stared through a haze conjured up by his wrath and recognized Peter Grefwilde, goggles, note-book and all. The ex-wrecker's hand fell to his hip-pocket.

"You accursed dog!" he cried. "Get out of my way or—"

But the historian had drawn before him, and a shining Smith & Wesson confronted him, while Peter evenly added:

"Revolvers down and hands up! Either we bar shooting or I take the first turn. Which shall it be?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL.

NOTHING will bring the average man to his senses any quicker than a revolver, and as the historian thus presented the case, Cain Magruder was convinced.

He kept his hands away from his own revolver, but scowled blackly at Grefwilde.

"So it's you, is it?" he growled.

"To the best of my judgment, it is," coolly replied Peter.

"I know you. You are a rattle-pated, half-starved book-agent, with more tongue than brains, and more gall than money. You're the chap that is writing up the Gunnison."

Cain tried to throw a deluge of sarcasm into his speech, but the poisoned barb glanced harmlessly from Peter's armor.

"Exactly," he replied; "and I shall be pleased to have your portrait for the work. Our charges are: two hundred dollars for a steel-engraving, half-price for wood-cut. And a biographical sketch thrown in for nothing."

"Curse you and your biography! Let us talk as man to man. I have seen you at King's; seen you smile on Miriam like a human hyena!"

"I remember seeing you from a window one day, and, Mr. Templeton, I was impressed by the gentle expression on your face. If I had that face, sir, I should use it to catch flies, instead of molasses spread on paper."

"If I had your brains, I'd use them to—"

"Wait! How can you tell what you'd do with an article of which you never had a supply in your life?"

Peter's voice was perfectly free from sarcasm or anger, and it stung Cain to the quick. The latter could storm and rave, but he knew he was no adept at cool repartee like the man in the blue goggles. He felt that he was sinking lower and lower in Miriam's estimation, and he turned to her almost imploringly.

"Will you go and leave us alone?" he asked.

"I will not," she retorted. "I shall stay and prevent trouble."

"Miss King, I beg that you will go," said Grefwilde, calmly. "I wish to secure material for a biographical sketch of this gentleman, and true worth is always modest in a crowd."

"But you will quarrel."

"Quarrel?" echoed Peter, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Not in the least degree. When I write a man up, he is usually so pleased that he sets up the wine, and sometimes throws in a stray cagle."

"Go," said Magruder, more quietly; "I am on my good behavior at Straight Flush, and I promise you I will do nothing lawless. But I want to talk with this man."

Miriam glanced at Grefwilde, but he nodded so significantly that she hesitated no longer. She had no desire to remain where the two men were indulging in severe language, and she gathered up her property and went away.

"Now then," said Cain, curtly, "a word in your ear. You are playing the gallant to that girl, and I am not sure but your oily tongue has rather interested her, but I want you to clearly understand that I will tolerate no interference. I am going to marry her myself, and—"

"Go away! You don't mean it!"

"Don't mean what?"

"That you're going to marry her."

"But I do, as you'll find to your cost if you interfere."

"What'll the aristocratic Georgia Templeton say?"

Dane started perceptibly.

"So she has told you all about me."

"She has told me nothing, but you can't suppose that in my official capacity as historian and biographer I have neglected to learn all about the Templetons. Such old and honorable families interest me."

"I'm glad of it," said Dane, suspiciously.

"Now, you are the son of John Jay Templeton; he of Patrick Henry, ditto; he of R. Oglethorpe, dit—"

"Never mind," said Dane, hurriedly, alarmed at this business-like statement. "We will skip all this, and—"

"One moment, please," said Peter, consulting his note-book. "I want to give you a few more items. Dane Templeton, the youngest scion of this old family, left his Georgia home something like four years ago, after trouble with his father, who is of a choleric disposition. He then began a career in the West. It is not to my purpose to follow him closely, but I want to give an account of one event in his career; something which occurred on a Mississippi steamer."

Magruder had grown decidedly nervous, and he now broke in impatiently.

"Have done with your cheap talk, will you? Don't I know my own history as well as you do?"

"Possibly I will convince you before I am through that you do not. Let me try, at least. But about this steamer episode. Dane Templeton took passage from Memphis for New Orleans. Before starting he received from a business man in the former place a sum of money amounting to about two thousand dollars, which he had won in a lucky speculation."

"Soon after he started he fell into conversation with a man who gave the name of Brown; a young fellow of about his own age. Brown proved to be a pleasant companion, and they became quite friendly. Finally, Brown invited Templeton to have a game of cards. Templeton refused politely, for he did not know one card from another. Finding him firm, Brown dropped the subject, but their intimacy continued.

"That night they stood on the deck together and talked. Now, the situation was one calculated to make a man speak freely, and Templeton did so. He told about his Georgia home; his stern old father, and other matters. It is but fair to say that Mr. Brown listened attentively."

"What is all this to me?" asked Cain, impatiently—yet, somehow, anxious to know all that Grefwilde could tell.

"I am coming to that," was the even reply. "Be patient, for, as a historian, I make it a point to fill in all possible elements of importance. To return to Templeton and Brown, it so happened that the latter finally heard a peculiar splash near the steamer. He looked over the rail, but could hear nothing further save the pounding of the engine and the usual boiling along the steamer's side. He still listened, thinking others might have heard that splash, but there was nothing to show that they had.

"Now comes a curious fact. Brown was standing alone at that particular point; Templeton was nowhere to be seen! Why? Because it was when his body struck the water that the splash sounded; Brown had thrown him overboard!"

Cain Magruder had grown pale, and he looked at his companion with a wild gleam in his eyes.

"It is a lie!" he declared, hoarsely.

"Then you were not thrown overboard?"

"I was not."

"Well, Dane Templeton was."

"It is as false as perdition! I am Dane Templeton, and I ought to know something about it. If you are talking of the Georgia Templeton, you have been misinformed. All this is false."

"Let me go on, at any rate. Before Brown threw his companion overboard he had done another fine piece of work—he had secretly removed the two thousand dollars from Templeton's pocket. This was not a difficult matter, for Brown had picked many a pocket, and was an adept. His latest scheme was a success; he had the money, and no one suspected the tragedy which had occurred.

"His next step was prompt and business-like. He went below to Templeton's state-room and ransacked his victim's property. He secured letters and other papers, all of which he stowed away on his own person. No one suspected him, and the steamer went on to New Orleans. There Mr. Brown landed. He spent the night in a gambling-house, and increased his worldly possessions. The following morning he learned that a body had been found floating in the Mississippi, on which was clothing marked 'D. T.' The place where it was found and other circumstances, led him to believe that it was all that remained of his friend of the steamer.

"Brown's next move was a characteristic one. Despite Dane Templeton's trouble with his family, he had been in receipt of small sums of money which supplied his actual

wants, forwarded by the family lawyer. It occurred to Brown that he would like these little payments himself. So he studied Dane Templeton's writing, practiced long and carefully, and became Templeton himself."

The listener was not surprised. The grasp which Grefwilde plainly had on the subject had prepared him for the revelation, and he was ready to meet it.

"A fine romance!" he sneered.

"It is history," amended Grefwilde.

"Well, if Templeton is dead, who am I?"

"Brown, alias Cain Magruder, alias several other names."

"Do you accuse me of murdering the real Templeton?" demanded Cain, hotly.

"I accuse you of believing you had murdered him, but you were mistaken. Templeton still lives."

Cain had been looking keenly at the quiet face before him, and he now clinched his hand and faced the historian with a hostile light in his eyes.

"I see it all!" he cried. "You are Dane Templeton; you are the man whose story you tell so glibly; and you are here to bulldoze and blackmail me. But it won't work, my fine fellow; I'll fight you to the bitter end!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAIN MAGRUDER'S MOTHER.

The historian smiled slightly.

"So I look like Dane Templeton? Well, never mind; I shall never call upon you to refund the money you have been receiving from the Georgia lawyer, nor shall I have you arrested for throwing me overboard. Have you arrested, for I think it is admitted that you are Brown. Wait! Do not deny it now; I want to give you a few points about Brown, otherwise Magruder.

"Previous to the steamer episode, he led a wild life. He was a boy thief in St. Louis, and he advanced in crime and became one of Barb Brennan's train-wreckers. It was a singular chance which threw him into the society of the Brennans. Shall I explain why?"

"Yes," said Magruder, curious to know what would come next.

"Because they were his own father and mother!"

Cain Magruder started back. He was thoroughly surprised at last, and he looked at Grefwilde as though he were a more than human being who had somehow appeared to read to him the book of the past. But the last statement seemed so incredible that, after a brief pause, he broke into a laugh.

"Nonsense!" You are overdoing it, at last."

"I am telling the truth," was the grave reply.

"And Barb Brennan is my—that is, is Magruder's father?"

"Yes."

"Come; that is too much for credence," declared the ex-wrecker, trying to speak lightly, yet more impressed than he would have owned.

"I am telling only the truth."

"I never heard that Brennan had a son."

"He did, but neither he nor his wife knows that the child lived a day after its entrance to this stormy world."

"Then, how do you know it?"

"I make a point of gathering information."

Magruder had forgotten his hostility under the influence of this startling statement. Casting his thoughts backward, he remembered that, more than once when he rode with Black Barb's men, they had discovered that he resembled Meg Brennan. All this had seemed idle talk then, but it acquired new importance in the light of what Grefwilde had said. He had never known who his parents were, and, now that the subject was thus brought up, he felt a strong longing to have it settled.

"Prove what you assert!" he exclaimed.

"I will briefly give you the points, but I have duties to attend to elsewhere and must soon leave you. You must be aware already that Meg Brennan was Judge Westcourt's sister, and that when she married Wardsworth, or Brennan, as he is now called, the judge drove her forth from his house as though she had been a criminal. His only motive was that he did not like Wardsworth—I will call him Brennan—but it must be confessed that the young fellow was a bad lot. His only reason for marrying Margaret Westcourt was to get her money, for he supposed she was a co-heir with her brother, which was a mistake, for Brinsley held all the power; and when he found that he was to get no money at all he went from bad to worse.

"Matters came to a crisis two years after their marriage. Barb was arrested, found guilty of burglary, and sentenced for five years. The shock nearly killed his wife. She had brain fever and was unconscious for a long time. It was while she was thus afflicted that the only child the couple ever had was born.

"Poor Meg was among strangers, and they, actuated by the theory that she was as bad as her husband, and that the only chance to save the child from going to the bad was to separate it from her, placed it in an asylum. When Meg recovered her senses she was told that her child was dead, and she never doubted the statement.

"But the boy lived. He remained nine years

in the asylum, and, even at that age, was noted for his depravity. Then he ran away and became a veritable street Arab in St. Louis. He grew up a thief, and became the Cain Magruder who once rode with Barb Brennan."

Grefwilde had cut his story short, for he saw that when he began the tale of the boy's asylum life, his listener no longer followed. Such was the fact. Cain Magruder remembered his life in the asylum too well to hear it described by others. All his attention was on the strange story told him. Was it possible he was Meg Brennan's son? He did not think of Barb then, but even to the vicious, the wrecker's wife, with her undying devotion to her husband, had always seemed a noble character.

Meg Brennan's son!

Cain put his hand to his head as though in pain. He had some idea of what she had suffered. He knew she was by nature refined and sensitive, and he had often looked into her hollow, dusky eyes and seen a world of woe there. But she had borne all for the man she loved.

Rarely in his life of crime had Cain Magruder had an honest, noble feeling, but he felt an impulse then to go to the suffering woman, throw himself at her feet and cry:

"I am your son—your sinful son! Teach me to live a nobler life; give me the light of your love!"

The feeling would soon pass. It was only a ray of light struggling up from the darkness, and Cain was doomed to die as he had lived, unless something wonderful occurred, but what man so depraved that he never has an hour of what he calls weakness?—the accusing voice of his better nature?

Grefwilde was watching curiously, but he said no more until Cain turned to him.

"Is this a romance, or can it be proven?"

"It can be proven. Take this paper. On it are directions which, if followed, will establish all I have said. I have a suggestion to make, however."

"What is it?"

"No good can come of telling this to Meg Brennan. She believes her child died before it was a day old. Better so than that she should learn that it had lived to become—Cain Magruder."

"You are right," was the ready reply, "and it shall be so. But I shall test your information; I must know all. Man, who are you that seems to possess supernatural information?"

His tone had suddenly changed, and he aroused and looked sharply at Grefwilde. The latter smiled quietly.

"I am at present the historian of the Gunnison. I have, however, written more than one history, and strange secrets have become my property. Your case fell in line incidentally, and I thought I'd tell you all I knew."

Cain looked at him suspiciously, but the pale, scholarly face was grave and calm and he could not read it. He abandoned the attempt after a few moments.

"I am going to test the accuracy of your information. This may be only a device to get me away from Straight Flush, but I shall go. When I return, I shall see you again."

He turned partly away, and then paused as he remembered that his absence would leave a clear field for Grefwilde with Miriam. Words trembled on his lips, but his belligerent mood was for the time quelled and he suppressed them. He walked silently toward the village.

The historian smiled quietly, and then more slowly followed.

"So he thinks I resemble the real Dane Templeton," muttered the man with the goggles.

"Well, he will learn more about Dane before he is many weeks older, I reckon."

Cain went straight to the cabin where Meg Brennan and Rose still lived. They were the only occupants of the place. Much to Rose's relief, Brennan had decided that other quarters were safer for him, and he seldom troubled the cabin. He had a dozen stout fellows with him, and a cave sheltered them all.

Magruder entered the little house. Meg and Rose sat beside a table, and seemed to have finally finished eating. They greeted the visitor rather coldly, but he did not heed it. Assuming a careless air, he was looking at the wrecker's wife closely.

Was she really his mother? It seemed an absurd idea from one point of view, but he was not sure of his position. He believed that his eyes, forehead and hair were like hers; he had often been told so in the old days, and it might be more than a chance resemblance.

But, be that as it might, it was clear she suspected nothing, and he certainly would not inform her then. Somehow, hardened as he was, he shrunk from presenting himself as a scoundrel with the load of crime on his hands, and he felt kindly toward her, despite the fact that she had prevented him from marrying Judge Westcourt's daughter.

He sat down and came to business at once.

"I am going away from Straight Flush for awhile, so I withdraw my last objection to delay in King's case. Brennan can have his way, and the railroad shall be built before we make war on the judge. By that time I'll return, and then I'll help Miss Thomas all I can."

"This delay is painful to me," said Rose. "I have sent word to my uncle, Aaron Thomas, where I am, but he does not come. I begin to be worried about him."

"Nonsense! It is your nature to worry about every one. I dare say your uncle is all right."

"He may be sick."

"Or too busy to respond at once. Don't worry."

"For my part, I wish this quiet life could last forever," said Meg, thoughtfully.

"What design has Barb against the new road?" Cain slowly asked.

The wrecker's wife shivered.

"He has not told me."

A silence ensued. Each of them felt capable of answering the question. Did Barb Brennan ever have but one design against any road? His trade was so much a part of himself that it was doubtful if he would have abandoned wrecking had he suddenly become a millionaire.

As the trio sat thus they were not aware that they were being observed secretly; that a human head was pressed against one window—a head, for the face was concealed by a slouch hat and a mask. The wearer of these articles was the Horned Dragon.

This redoubtable fellow hovered near until Magruder left the cabin, and then quickly fell in behind Cain and began dogging his steps.

"If you'll lead me to Barb Brennan, well and good," he muttered, flitting lightly from rock to rock. "It's several days since I had a hank at the gang, and I want to show Barb I still live. Curse him! I'll make matters warm for him about Straight Flush, or wherever else he sees fit to go."

The Dragon suddenly paused, as it became clear that Cain was going straight to the village.

"No use!" he snarled. "He ain't going to Brennan, and I shall have to use my own judgment. I suppose the wrecker is hiding in some hole in the rocks. Well, I'll be after him sooner or later."

He moved his mask a little and looked down at the village.

"Ha! ha! my embryo town, you don't know the mine that is gathering under your feet. You are happy in your railroad and your great man, but, one of these days, Cortlandt King will be frozen out and Straight Flush—well, she's likely to go up in thin smoke!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CAPTURED TRAIN.

A MONTH later.

The Straight Flush & Valley railroad was finished. The work, diligently pushed, had been completed, and the first trip had been made. A train had been run to Bludsoe and back, but not a public train. The honor of opening the new road had been reserved for the stockholders and their families, and the run had been so successful that the former were in the best of spirits.

The conductor on the trip had been John Loring.

When it was first suggested to Cortlandt King that a place be given the ex-employee of the Overland route, he had declared that the man should never work a day for them. He was led to change his position. It was found that Loring had purchased the share of Smallpox Sam, and Kyle Kirby and several other men advocated his cause.

Peter Grefwilde was one of them. The historian had been introduced to John a few hours before, but it seemed that some one had been priming him in advance, for he took up the case readily. He urged the importance of having a veteran like Loring in charge, and King finally gave way.

No one was more surprised than the conductor. He had corresponded with Braceridge through their secret post-office, and received assurances that all was working well, but he had given little credence until he was formally appointed. He went about his duties faithfully, but was far from being at ease. He disliked the air of mystery in which he moved. Braceridge seemed to be playing some deep game of which he was kept ignorant, and there was no knowing into what trouble he might run his head.

Once more he was on good terms with Rose, but he had not been able to persuade her to give up her intentions against King. On this point she was firm, and he understood that when the road was fairly running, there was to be a combination against King composed of Brennan, his wife, Cain Magruder and Rose.

When John thought of it he grew gloomy. He knew that circumstances often made strange alliances, but the idea of his "gentle dove," as he romantically termed Rose, associating with such people, was shocking to honest John.

The "gentle dove," however, had developed a will of her own, and she was resolved that King should acknowledge the legality of his marriage to Mabel Carter.

One thing troubled Rose greatly. Aaron Thomas was missing. Two messengers had been sent to him. His house had been found deserted. Where was he? Report said he had gone out vowing to find Rose. After that no word

came of him, and those who had seen him before he started shook their heads gravely as they mentioned how old and worn he had grown.

Anxiety would have given place to alarm had they known of the episode of Cupid's head.

Cain Magruder had not yet returned to Straight Flush. What he was doing none there knew. Little did Meg Brennan suspect the object of his absence.

The Horned Dragon had become an unpleasant feature at the village. His sinister make-up had alarmed several of the women, and King had offered a reward for his capture. He was not found.

Barb Brennan and his men kept close in their cave. King did not suspect his brother-in-law was near, but, as wolves wait for a wounded buffalo to fall, so the train-wreckers were waiting for the S. F. & V. to be completed.

It was finished at last; the opening train had been run; and on the morning of the fifth of October actual business began. John Loring ran a train from Straight Flush to Bludsoe. The passengers were not numerous, but they had no desire to carry people *away* from the village. It was known that many people were at Bludsoe who were waiting to be taken to Eagle Bend, Yellow Dog, Demon Gulch and Straight Flush; so a good freight was expected on their return.

Grefwilde was the only official of the road who made this trip, and he was only a quiet passenger in appearance.

The train reached Bludsoe, remained an hour, and then started back. The way it filled up surprised all. Every seat was filled when the start was made. It was a hybrid mass of humanity, with about one woman to every ten men. The former were the wives of men who proposed to settle at Straight Flush. Grefwilde had boomed the town with the skill of experience, and "pilgrims" came flocking from all quarters of Colorado.

When Loring went through for tickets, he was made aware that he had a rough crowd aboard—men whom he easily set down as cowboys and rough-and-tumble young miners out for a general spree. With this class he was quite familiar from experience on the Overland, and he had no great trouble in getting all his fares.

When midway in the last car, however, he had a genuine surprise. Slouching in a seat like a big toad squatting on its native soil, he saw a familiar figure. The man had bushy yellow hair and mustache, but black eyes looked out at him from under heavy, black brows, and around the thick neck was a red handkerchief, which its owner gnawed, dog-fashion.

Barb Brennan!

Loring would have known him anywhere, and his mind went back to the old, stormy days on the Overland when this man had been a veritable terror.

The conductor felt a strong desire to deliver him up to justice now, but Barb was on his good behavior, and his strange alliance with Rose fettered Loring's hands. His blood boiled, however. Was he to disregard everything, and let the red-handed wrecker have full sway, just because of Rose's foolish fancy?

There was a hostile glitter in the conductor's eyes, but he remembered David Braceridge's advice and curbed himself.

Brennan's gaze was on him, and the outlaw knew his disguise was penetrated.

"It's all right," he said, in a low voice. "I'm ez harmless ez a kitten. Don't be afraid."

"See that you go mighty slow!" retorted John.

He passed on, taking tickets right and left, but thinking of Brennan only. He was excited, and it was hard work to keep his hands off the ruffian. What proof had he that the train was not to be sacked?

This thought was in his mind as he took the last ticket and turned around. He found himself facing a reckless, dare-devil-looking fellow, in a jaunty, half-Mexican suit, with a profusely ornamented sombrero set on one side of a mass of long hair.

"Pard," said this man, blantly but pleasantly, "I'm Bill Boggles, right from the cattle-ranges. I'm an ex-deacon an' a sheriff in Hugo, whar I tie up, an' I'm a disciple o' law. Still, I like a quiet racket now an' then, an' so do the fifty odd pards that foller me. Now, I don't s'pose ye insist on our settin' in our seats like dummies?"

"Why, what else do you want to do?" asked Loring, who was not slow to suspect what was afoot.

"Oh! only wander 'round a leetle an' see the sights."

"And make yourselves disagreeable to the other passengers?"

"Hey? What? We be disagreeable? Go 'way! you're jokin', pard corn-doctor," declared Bad Bill.

"What I want to impress on your mind is the fact that I have railroaded several years in the West, and I know that a cowboy is never happier than when he captures a train for a lark. They often go too far though. Sometimes they flourish revolvers to the terror of quiet people, shoot out windows and smash lamps, and make

Rome howl. Of course I can't agree to that sort of thing here."

Loring's manner was blantly pleasant, and Bad Bill at once caught his hand.

"Pard, I see you're an old stager, an' I kin assure you we won't cut up rough. We'll be ez peac'ble ez a double-headed calf."

Bad Bill returned to his seat, and Loring hoped the storm had blown over, but only a few minutes had passed when the cowboys became uneasy. A tame ride to Straight Flush was not to their liking, and, one by one, they began to leave their seats and go roaming through the train.

Loring made it a point to get near Grefwilde, who was to all appearances unconscious of everything except the scenery by the way.

"There is going to be trouble," the conductor said.

"Nothing serious, I think," Grefwilde replied quickly.

"Those fellows are going to try and do as they please here."

"Well, it's impossible to prevent it if they insist. They have the reins of power if they see fit to use 'em."

"Do you advise me to let them go ahead?"

"Unless they get too turbulent, I do. Their object is fun, not actual lawlessness. Keep on good terms with them, argue the point the best you can, and trust to their decency to let roughness alone. Avoid trouble, because, if it comes to a fight, they are sure to win."

There was solid sense in the treasurer's advice, and with such authority to back him up, Loring was not reluctant to take an amicable course himself.

But the cowboys' idea of "fun" was not in the least funny to the other passengers. They began by firing their revolvers from the platforms of the cars, and as a variety of flashes circulated among them they became more reckless. They marched through the cars, singing and flourishing their revolvers, and the women became badly frightened.

Barb Brennan's blood fired, and, at last, the temptation to join the crowd became too strong to be resisted. He joined them, and from that moment became a leader in all their wild schemes.

Unfortunately for the passengers, the supply of liquor did not prove sufficient, and the peaceable people were called upon to contribute. Whoever carried a flask had to "treat," and as the liquor went down the spirits of the cowboys came up.

Loring and the other employees were helpless. They made it a point to keep on good terms with the gang, but the conductor's blood boiled. He only awaited the word from Grefwilde to try his level best to sustain order, but Grefwilde kept his seat and was the most nonchalant passenger on the train.

Word had been sent to the engineer to give his locomotive all the steam she would bear, and the train was whirling along at a terrific speed; it was Loring's idea to complete the journey ahead of time and get his unruly crowd to Straight Flush before they knew it.

Brennan had forced a little, old, withered-up man to give him his flask, and the liquor seemed to tear a road wherever it went. Barb gasped and nearly strangulated.

"By ther Etarnal! you've gi'n me liquid fire!" he sputtered, when he could speak, while all the cowboys laughed. "You've had your fun, an' now I'll hev mine. Come out inter ther aisle, an' dance a jig fur our amusement, you Egyptian mummy."

"I never danced in my life!" expostulated the little man.

"Wal, by ther fiends, you'll dance now or git salivated!" thundered Barb, shoving a revolver under the little man's nose.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CAGED!

THE wrecker's suggestion met with ready appreciation on the part of the cowboys. The little old man was as grave and solemn as a preacher, and the idea of making him dance was certainly a grimly facetious one, if not pleasant to the little man.

"Gentlemen, I protest against this indignity!" he exclaimed. "I have shared my whisky with you, but don't ask me to dance. I don't know the step; I never danced in my life. Gentlemen, I beg—"

But he got no further. Strong hands seized hold of him, and he was dragged into the passage-way and again ordered to dance.

"I appeal to the conductor!" he said, catching sight of Loring.

The latter, thoroughly aroused, tried to get to the old man, but twenty cowboys blocked the way and he was helpless.

Brennan cocked his revolver and again tickled his victim's nose with the muzzle.

"I give ye one minute ter dance," he said. "Ef ye don't do it then, I'll shoot a hole clean through ye. Now will ye dance?"

The little man danced.

It was a spectacle which made the cowboys roar with laughter, and even the cooler passengers to join. That the little man was a staid, professional person who never indulged in levity

was clear; that he knew nothing about dancing was plain. He moved as gracefully as a cow naturally would under similar circumstances, and the sight of the small, black figure skipping about impressed the cowboys as being the most comical thing out.

Even this grew monotonous after awhile, and they began roaming through the cars again. The train was approaching Demon Gulch, the last stop before reaching Straight Flush, and the cowboys seemed to come to some sort of an understanding. As the train halted they piled off in a body, and as they did not show signs of re-entering, the departure of the train was hastened.

It rolled away followed by the cheers and yells of the gang, and, a little later, a shower of bullets. No harm was done, and Demon Gulch was soon left behind.

The road was formally opened, and those who made the first trip never forgot it.

All felt relieved at the result, but the happiest person there was the little man who had been compelled to dance.

"There's one of them left!" he cried, pointing to a squat figure sleeping in a seat. "That fellow was the ringleader, but I fixed him; I drugged the liquor I handed over to him. I'm Doctor J. Q. Adams Ridley, and I'll have satisfaction when we get to Straight Flush. I'll have that fellow up for assault and battery, and he shall have all the law will allow."

The object of his wrath was Barb Brennan, and all the other passengers agreed that he ought to be made an example. The little doctor had, indeed, won a point. He had a medicine-chest with him, and when he saw that honest people were being called upon to surrender their flasks, he had quickly dropped a drug in his, and Barb, who had been the heaviest imbibers, had been scientifically laid out and was sleeping soundly.

A hand touched Doctor Ridley's shoulder, and he looked up and saw Grefwilde's calm face.

"The quickest way is always the best," observed the latter.

"How?"

"We don't want the ill-will of that crowd. Overlook their escapade and let this fellow go."

"Never!"

"Why should we seek further trouble?"

"Allow—me—to—ask—who—you—are, sir?" enunciated the little doctor, ferociously glaring at the blue goggles.

"I am treasurer of this road."

"And you counsel me to compound felony? Never, sir; never! I am going to Straight Flush to practice medicine, and I'll have justice there if it breaks a leg, to use a slangy expression. I am not a nobody, sir, but a legal practitioner, sir, and I'll have satisfaction for the indignities heaped upon me, sir. So you are the treasurer of the road, sir? Allow me to ask why you do not protect your passengers, sir? I have been infamously wronged, and it seems an official of the road sat by and never interfered. Is this the way to run a road? Is this Straight Flush justice?"

The little man had talked himself out of breath, but, before he was done, Grefwilde had retreated precipitately to his seat. Even he lacked the doctor's flow of language, and he saw that he would gain the ill-will of the new citizens by opposing the arrest.

Barb Brennan was no longer the terrible fellow that he was when awake. Thoroughly drugged, he slept as peacefully as a common man, and had it been generally known that he was the terror of the Overland he would have fared badly. Loring, to whom this fact was so well known, looked at him and gnawed his mustache fiercely.

"Confound the luck, so good a chance will never occur again. I can't see daylight in the case. Dave Braceridge was red-hot after him a while ago, and only lamented that he couldn't get and hold him, and now he has ordered me to keep off when I see the fellow and do nothing. One of these days Barb will be at his old tricks again."

When the train reached Straight Flush, Doctor Ridley made himself the most conspicuous person there, and through his efforts the sleeping desperado was soon conducted to jail. He moved uneasily while being carried, giving signs of speedy return to consciousness, but did not awake. Word was then sent to Cortlandt King, for the doctor seemed determined that his persecutor should be tried, condemned and put to hard labor within the day. It was an hour before King arrived, however, and Ridley was then away to supper.

The president of the S. F. & V. entered the cell with an air of indifference, for he supposed that no more than a common roysterer had been caged, but as he saw the prisoner he started back in surprise. Barb had recovered his senses and sat in a chair, yawning and scowling at one and the same time.

He laughed harshly when he saw King.

"So it's you!" exclaimed the magnate.

"Reckon it are, my b'loved brother-in-law," growled Barb. "Glad ter see ye don't desert me in my hour o' tribulation."

"I didn't know you were here."

"No?"

"No. If I had, I'd have doubled the guard."

"Ye would, eh? Why?"

"Because the rewards for the capture of Barb Brennan may as well go to me as to any other man."

"They won't go ter you."

"Why not?"

"Because ye'll set me free."

"I'll see you hanged first."

"No ye won't, old man. I'm goin' free—you hear me, *free*—or that'll be one idol ther less in Straight Flush. I'll tell 'em that Cortlandt King is the runaway jedge o' Belplain."

"What if you do? There is no charge against me there."

"I don't reckon ye want yer past showed up; ef ye did, ye wouldn't hev changed yer name, shaved so close and dyed yer ha'r. No, no; it won't work. You ain't ther rooster ter prosecute me, Brin Westcourt."

"By my life, I *will* prosecute you to the extent of the law. Don't imagine you can defy me. I am well fixed here, and if I say the word you'll never go to a court outside the Gunnison. I'll give you a taste of the law you have so long defied. I told you twenty-five years ago, Tom Wardsworth, that I'd live to see you hanged, and I'll see my prophecy verified."

Brennan's bold gaze wavered a little. He believed that if he was sent to Kansas or Nebraska for trial he could tell enough to make matters warm for King, but he remembered the fate of Crow McKittrick, and was afraid King would get up another Judge Lynch sociable and get him out of the way as Crow had gone.

"You want ter be mighty keerful," he said, warningly. "I've got a heap o' friends 'round hyar, an' I'll make it mighty hot fur ye."

"Rubbish! I laugh at your threats."

"Hear me, Brin Westcourt," said the wrecker, in a grating voice; "I've never done you no harm, fur yer sister Meg has asked it o' me ez a special favcr, but I sw'ar that ef you play me false I'll hev yer life. Chaw that!"

His ferocious scowl disturbed the magnate's nerves, and as a step sounded outside the door, he hurriedly replied:

"I'll keep your secret for a while. Some one is coming—be silent!"

It was Doctor Ridley, and when he saw King he clamored loudly for vengeance. He obtained but little satisfaction, for King was decidedly cold, only giving him the assurance that the prisoner would be tried the following day.

The magnate left the jail as soon as he could and returned to his house. On entering, a servant informed him that two ladies were waiting for him in the office, and he went there at once. One glance was enough to bring a scowl to his face; the callers were Meg Brennan and Rose Thomas.

He paused and seemed inclined to retreat, but Rose spoke quickly, her voice clear and sharp:

"Sir, we wish to speak with you."

"Well, speak away!" growled the ex-judge, dropping into a chair sullenly.

"We have come for justice."

"Justice took the morning train for Bludsoe, and hasn't come back yet. See here! do you mean to follow me around the world, and forever thrust your affairs into my face? I suppose you are here about Brennan now."

"I want to ask you to release him," said Meg, mildly.

"I won't do it. What business had he to kick up a row on the train? There's a big reward out for his capture, and I may as well have it as any one else."

Meg tried to move him by appealing to his better nature, but the attempt was a failure. He believed that the way to govern these women was to show the iron hand, and he showed it to the best of his ability, and declared that he would not yield a particle of mercy. On the contrary, he intended to reveal what was not yet generally known: the fact that the prisoner was Barb Brennan; and let him stand trial for his many crimes.

This threat brought a flush to Meg's pale face.

"Beware!" she cried. "Do not be too implacable. If he goes on trial, you shall go too, as an accomplice."

"I, an accomplice?"

"Yes, you. Do you forget that you planned the attack on the Belplain jail, by which Barber was rescued? I can produce the very men you hired, and they shall appear against you if you refuse to help my husband now."

King's face fell. He had not been prepared for this attack.

"You must be very proud of your record," added Rose.

"So you are there!" growled the ex-judge.

"Yes, I am here; another witness to your fine career. You ruined my mother's life, and have done your best to serve me the same way. We are not the only people you have ground under your iron heel. What of Aaron Thomas?"

places, it was absolutely of tissue where Aaron was concerned. Aaron and Cupid were the haunting terrors of his later life. He stared at Rose now, and wondered if the hillside tragedy had been exposed, and he was about to be accused of the crime. He would not have been surprised had Rose produced Cupid's head and made a formal charge.

But her next words afforded him slight relief.

"You look guilty and startled. I believe you know where Aaron is."

He made a strong effort to regain his calmness.

"Waiting his turn to come in and interview me, I suppose," he sneered.

"Has he not been here?"

"He has not."

Rose sighed and relapsed into silence, and her manner convinced him that she had no knowledge of Aaron's fate. He breathed freer. Perhaps, after all, the grave would hold its secret and his crime.

Meg returned to the attack. She had discovered the judge's weak point, and she enlarged on her idea of producing the Belplain witnesses until King saw that he must really yield.

"Have it your own way," he said; "Brennan shall go free. If his identity is not discovered there is nothing for which to hold him. His escapade on the train was not a capital crime, and I shall be upheld in letting him off with a small fine. It isn't wise to anger the class of which he is to be a member. I will fine him lightly, and furnish the money to pay it myself if he is hard up financially."

Meg saw that he meant what he said, and she breathed a sigh of relief. One point was satisfactorily settled. Rose, however, had not come as a petitioner for Brennan's life, and she believed the time had come to state her own case.

She opened on the judge by demanding justice for her mother. She asked for no share of his money; mature deliberation had decided her to reject that, even if it was offered; but she did ask, and demand, that he acknowledge to the whole world that Mabel Carter had been his legal wife.

King heard and pondered. He was not sure but she had named the easiest way out of his difficulty, but he looked forward to the time when he would resume his own name, and it would be a severe blow to his pride to acknowledge that he had married an ignorant girl whom he would not dare recognize. From his point of view there was a great gulf between the rich and poor and he had an immense amount of pride.

Beset by these contradictory emotions, he desired time to think the matter over more carefully than he had ever done before, and he stated his wish to Rose. She at first declined to comply with his request, for she suspected that it hid contemplated treachery, but he urged the point so strongly that she yielded.

It was not likely, she thought, that he would run away from Straight Flush and abandon his railroad enterprise.

So it was settled that he should have three days in which to consider the matter, and then Rose and Meg departed.

Once more alone, King arose and paced the room in deep thought. His meditations were not pleasant. He had once called himself an honorable man, and as he ran over the last years of his life he saw scenes which almost appalled him. One step had led to another until—he glanced at the image of Cupid and shivered.

The reappearance of Rose troubled him. She was only a girl, but she had the power to do him great injury. He had hoped never to see her again, but she had come just when his railroad enterprise was at its flood-tide.

"I wish I had the nerve to serve her as I served that meddling fool of an Aaron," he muttered. "He got too obnoxious, and now he sleeps on the hillside. Can't I get rid of her, somehow? Egad, and why not? If she is abducted and locked up somewhere, what becomes of her secret? Meg is too wise to defy my wrath by telling it. By the demons, I'll do it! There are fellows here in Straight Flush who can be hired to do anything, and what matters it if I put myself in their power? I shall soon disappear from their sight forever."

He sat down and opened his desk, taking from it several letters. The first was from the firm that had furnished the rails of the S. F. & V. road. They urgently requested payment of money due. The second was from the manufacturers of the cars. They made the same request. And so the list went on.

King leaned back in his chair and smiled darkly.

"A road built and in good condition, and no money paid. This safe is full of the funds my fellow stockholders suppose I have handed over to our debtors. Won't there be a breeze when I walk off with the money? They'll find a road and a mighty debt on their hands, but no money."

He glanced from the window and saw Grefwilde passing.

"A trusty knave! He has helped me well, and I am duly grateful. I suppose he expects to feather his own nest. Well, I'll help him a trifle, but to no one will I be prodigal. I was the

CHAPTER XXXV.

CUPID'S HEAD.

CORTLANDT KING started violently, and changed color. If his armor was weak in

former of this scheme, and I intend to have the name and the game!"

On the following day Barb Brennan was tried under the name of Zach Moffett, fined a small amount and released. King, who had been made a justice, spoke eloquently about the necessity of being forgiving toward one of a class of men whose only fault was an over-abundance of animal spirits; and no one questioned the wisdom of his act except the little doctor, who would have been glad to see the prisoner quartered, or lynched, or consigned to some other dire fate.

Brennan paid his fine, thanked his judge, winked significantly and departed.

King hoped he had drawn the fangs of one enemy, but he by no means felt confident that such was the fact.

During the day the ex-judge interviewed three rough fellows of the village to the satisfaction of both parties, and, at the supper table, he was in unusual spirits, meeting Grefwilde point for point, much to Miriam's amusement.

Afterward he retired to his office, but had hardly settled down when the servant announced a caller. He received, on an average, ten every day, and he ordered the latest arrival shown in at once.

The latest arrival came, and King, looking at him, saw a man in a cloak, slouch hat and mask. All these things were well enough except the mask. That looked so suspicious that King started up from his chair, but the visitor made a reassuring gesture.

"I beg that you will be seated," he said, pleasantly. "I am a friend."

"Friends do not usually call with masks over their faces."

"True, but I have a good reason."

"Who are you?"

"Oh! as for a name, I am called the Horned Dragon. Not a romantic one, but good enough for ordinary occasions."

"It strikes me you must be the fellow who has been prowling about the village, scaring the women and children."

"Indeed! Well, I may have prowled a trifle, but there was no reason why the women and children should be scared. Have I ever molested them?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Of course I haven't."

"Well, why are you here?"

"Thank you for reminding me that I came on business. We will attend to it at once."

The Dragon took a seat as coolly as though by invitation, and then added:

"Do you wish to buy an image of Cupid?"

King felt that his face paled with a rush, but it was in shadow, for which he was grateful. But, powers of mercy, what meant the Dragon's question? The name of Cupid had grown accursed to him; was he never to hear the last of it? This man—who was he, and what was the meaning of his question?

By a great effort the guilty wretch answered calmly:

"I don't exactly understand."

"I'll try to explain. I see you have an image of Cupid on your desk. Do you wish to buy a second one?"

"No, sir; I do not," was the curt reply.

"You used to have another. What has become of that?"

King felt a sensation as though something was crawling up and down his back; something cold and clammy.

"You are mistaken; I never had another one," he asserted.

"Possible? I was under the impression you did. Well, as you are the one man in Straight Flush who can possibly care for bric-a-brac, I have brought you a trifle which I hope to sell. I am hard up financially, and a dollar would do me a great deal of good. Here is my bric-a-brac."

And he drew from under his cloak and held up before King a round, bronze-colored object which had clearly been shaped by human hands.

"Cupid's head!" said the Horned Dragon, calmly.

Pale and trembling, Cortlandt King sat and gazed at the awful object. He was incapable of motion; incapable of everything except the power to stare at that thing. It was a head of Cupid, and it looked like the head of Cupid—the same he had broken and lost when he struck down Aaron Thomas on the hillside.

Banquo's ghost could not have caused more consternation than did this object.

"Would you like it?" continued the Horned Dragon, eying it with respectful criticism.

"True it is only a fragment, but it may be very ancient. Possibly it comes from the ruins of some old city, or tomb."

The glare of desperation appeared in King's eyes. His worst suspicions seemed confirmed. He was sure he beheld the head of Cupid, the loss of which he had so deplored, and he had no doubt but the investigation he so feared had been secretly afoot and had reached such a point that he was to be charged with the crime. Who was the Horned Dragon—a detective come to accuse and arrest him?

The man of mystery seemed to read the des-

perate light in his companion's eyes, for he leaned forward and spoke calmly:

"Do nothing rash. An assertion that I tried to rob yonder safe will not work against me. Don't try it!"

The reference was unmistakable. Did the man know everything?

"Where did you get that thing?" demanded King.

"This? Oh, I found it in a junk-store."

"Why do you bring it to me?"

"Didn't I say I wanted to sell it?"

"Who would buy such a mutilated thing?"

"Do you mean to insinuate that 'tis of no value? Well, you may be right, but I believe there are men who would give piles of money to possess it—youself, for instance. Pity it is mutilated. I tried to get the rest, but couldn't. Looking at this bodyless head, so sadly bereaved, I am led to believe murder has been done and the secret buried in the grave!"

King needed no more to assure him his crime was known. He tried to rise, but he felt as though stifling and there was a strange ringing in his ears, and with a gasp he fell senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"THE THUNDERS OF DOOM."

WHEN Cortlandt King recovered from his swoon the Horned Dragon was gone. The magnate sat erect and looked wildly about him. Memory was active, and he at once remembered what had occurred, but it was not until he had closely searched the room that he felt sure his treacherous visitor was not still lurking near.

But he was really gone, and with him Cupid's head. The new Cupid still stood on the desk, airily poised for a shot at an imaginary heart. That he would ever hit one seemed doubtful, but the barb of the old Cupid was in Cortlandt King's feverish flesh.

The wretched man sat down at the desk and buried his head in his hands. He tried to remember all that the Horned Dragon had said, to weigh each word, sentence and inflection.

He remembered enough to make him miserable. The last startling words of his visitor seemed branded on his brain:

"I am led to believe murder has been done, and the secret buried in the grave!"

The words seemed to admit of but one construction. Clearly the mysterious man knew of the tragedy on the hillside, and, whether he intended to betray the fact or not, he held the magnate in his power. He had said the secret was buried in the grave, but the words were a mockery. If he knew of Aaron's murder, the secret was anything but buried in the grave.

"The thunders of doom are rattling around my head," muttered the miserable man, "and I have no way to avert my fate. No way? Let me see; let me think. What of those stout ruffians I have already engaged to help me with Rose? They would be glad to earn additional money by putting the Horned Dragon out of the way. By my life, I'll put them on the track, and if money can accomplish my object, he shall die, secret and all."

For some time the president studied the matter and then a new idea came to him. If the Horned Dragon knew where Aaron's body was buried, it would be his strongest item of evidence to produce the remains.

"That thing must be removed!" King declared. "There are many hiding-places on the hill, and I will move it to where even the hounds of law cannot find it. As soon as it becomes dark I'll play the sexton and draw the Dragon's fangs. Wait! Delay is dangerous; a few hours may give all the power into his hands. Dare I go to the hillside now? Why not? My spade is still there, and the place is retired. Few people ever go there."

Despite these arguments, he hesitated long. It was a very risky thing to disinter the body of a murdered man in broad daylight. On the other hand was the chance that in a few hours the Dragon would have men there to open the grave, and thus secure damning proof against the slayer.

King was between two fires, and he knew not what to do. But he was compelled to decide one way, and it was in favor of the disinterment. Even now, the Dragon might be in the village swearing out a charge against him, but his elevated position would make his friends slow to act.

He must improve the delay to remove and secrete the body.

Having arrived at this decision, he arose, put on his hat and left the house. He went at once to the hillside, taking care that he was not followed or observed.

In a few minutes he reached the scene of the tragedy. Aaron's grave had not been disturbed. He secured the spade, which he had concealed under a rock, and went to the grave. He raised the spade for the first plunge into the soil, but it was not made.

Pale and shivering, King stood over the terrible spot. He had anticipated his movements and his fancy had conjured up the face of Aaron. Perspiration started out on his person. In imagination he saw the secret of the grave, and he became as weak as a child.

Again and again he tried to begin. The spade was raised, but it was never thrust into the ground.

Finally he drew back abruptly.

"I can't do it—I can't!" he exclaimed. "Not for all the wealth of the world would I see what lies *there*. I will get away from here—the place is accursed!"

He turned and hurried away, flinging the spade into a recess among the rocks, and then crept back toward his house.

"I'll see Nick Anson again; he and his fellows must hunt down the Dragon. I'll pay them a thousand dollars to show me that fiend, dead forever to the world!"

"Durn the women! why don't they put out their light?"

"They're settin' up ter cackle."

"We'll never hatch our plot if they do that."

"Be patient, can't ye? That's the way ter hatch."

"You had better both be still, rather than ter talk nonsense."

The speakers were three men who were crouched in the rocks near the cabin occupied by Meg Brennan and Rose. They were, in brief, Nick Anson and his friends; the men selected by Cortlandt King to abduct Rose. Thus far had they advanced on their work. They were near the cabin, and only waiting for their intended prey to retire, and for silence and slumber to settle over the house, and then they proposed to break in and kidnap her.

"I want ter finish this job an' get onter t'other one," growled Grizzly Jake.

"Ther Horned Dragon biz?"

"Yas."

"Mighty curious w'ot all this flurry o' King's means. He wants ther gal stole an' ther Dragon slayed, an' what-not. I really can't ketch on ther merits o' ther 'casion."

"W'ot do you keer, Tanglefoot, ez long ez you gits yer boodee."

"Does it puzzle you fellers?" asked Anson abruptly.

"Yas, it does."

"It did me, at first blush, but I'm onter it now. I reckon King ain't no angel, an' these people know ter much about him."

"Durned ef we won't hev ther ole man in our power arter it."

"Go 'way, Tanglefoot; you're stupid. We don't want ter harass King. He offers good pay, an' I'm a squar' man. What we do gain is a chance ter throw ourselves 'round loose arter this, an' ther ole man won't dar meddle with us."

"Hi! thar goes ther light!" said Grizzly Jake.

It had disappeared, and all things indicated that the women had retired. But the abductors knew they must wait until their prey was asleep, so they settled down to take it coolly. Thus an hour passed. Then they arose and walked softly toward the house.

The particular point at which they hoped to effect an entrance had already been chosen, and they moved to the scuth side of the building where a low window afforded the desired chance.

"Keep a sharp watch, boyees," said Anson, "and I'll hev a light o' glass cut in ther tremble o' a mule's heel. Hyar we go!"

He had drawn the tools necessary for the work, but, at that moment, a stern voice broke in on their operations.

"Hold on, there! When a glazier is wanted at this house, we'll let you know. Until then, keep to yourselves."

The trio of ruffians had started with alarm, but when they looked and saw only a single man, they became defiant and ugly.

"What've you got ter do about it?" growled Anson.

"I've got a mighty lot to do about it, as you find if you don't haul off. I have you all, and if you disobey me, I'll make matters hot for you."

"What ef we do ez ye say?"

"Then, for reasons sufficient to me, I'll say nothing."

"Look hyar, who be you? Yer voice sounds sorter old-fashioned, but I'm durned ef I kin place ye."

"My name is John Loring."

"Ther blazes it is!"

Anson's voice sounded shaky. He knew enough of the conductor to be aware that he was a man not to be trifled with, and he looked for a way out of the scrape. His first impulse had been to use his revolver, but he knew that would alarm the women and foil the abduction scheme. Now, he wished he saw a clear road to safety.

"I know very well why you are here, men, and if I was not under pledge I'd make it hot for him who sent you. But my hands are tied, and I am willing to compromise. If you are sensible enough to go away, so be it. But, look ye, it won't do any good for you to come again. There isn't an hour of the night but this house is watched by men who will guard it to the death. You may as well give up your job, once and forever."

Anson thought a little bluffing would do no harm.

"Look you," he exclaimed, "do you s'poso

one man kin crow over three? Not any, my gamecock, you bet!"

"Why, you confounded fools, I wouldn't care if there was a dozen of you!" cried John. "I consider myself good for you three, while as for numbers—"

He paused and whistled, and another shadowy form appeared beside him.

"If you're not satisfied now, I'll have up some more," he added. "What do you say? I want you to clearly understand that this house is not to be raided. Why, I've expected this thing all along, and I'd have been a fool to leave a clear sweep for you. There is one in that house that I'm willing to shed my blood for, and shed it I will, if necessary. But somebody else is more likely to get laid out. This is the Gibralter of the Gunnison, and it can't be taken."

Anson began to think so, himself.

"What pledge hev we that ye won't go back on us ef we drawn off?" he slowly asked.

"My word of honor. I know you are the tools of a bigger rascal, and I don't bear you so very much ill will. Your trade is that of red work, and you are only following it out. Go, and never come back, and you may feel safe."

"We'll do it," replied Anson, feeling, somehow, that they had taken hold of a bigger job than he had supposed. "Ef this shanty hez got a regiment o' infancy an' artillery hangin' 'round ez a guard, you kin count me out. Shall we go now?"

"As soon as you please."

It pleased them to go at once, and Loring and the dark figure were left masters of the situation.

"I knew it would come, sooner or later," said John. "Old King could no more keep his hands off than a pickpocket can. What I'm afraid of, Braceridge, is that he will come again."

"Rest easy," replied the voice of the detective. "With the guard we have here, your girl is safe. Believe me when I say it. I have this thing down fine, and as the trap will soon spring, the suspense is about over."

"Why not spring the trap now?"

"The time has not come."

"Braceridge, is this delay wise?"

"It is," serenely replied the detective. "Every one of our men are marked and watched. Barb Brennan believes he is free, and about to resume operations as a wrecker; but he is watched every hour and cannot do harm or escape. Straight Flush swarms with my men. Cortland King's every movement is watched. Be at ease, John, for the game is in our own hands."

"I wish I was equally sure of it; but you keep me lamentably in the dark, Braceridge."

"You are not the only man who is in the dark," was the dry reply.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE IMAGE OF THE GRAVE.

THE following morning John Loring was summoned to the presence of the president of the Straight Flush & Valley railroad. He went at once.

He found King and Grefwilde in the office, both busy over papers; but while the former at once turned to the conductor, Grefwilde did not raise his head or stop his busy pen.

"Mr. Loring," said the president, curtly, "please be seated. I wish to speak ab ut the trouble on your train the day Doctor Ridley came to town."

"Very well, sir," replied John, wondering if the magnate really knew of the events of the previous night.

"Complaint has been made to me that you used no efforts to quell the riot of the cowboys, and the honest passengers are very indignant—they are fairly wild."

"Allow me to ask how six or eight employees were going to worst fifty odd men, all hard fighters?"

"Did you try?"

"I tried to maintain order."

"Did you use physical force?"

"No, sir."

"Why didn't you?" severely demanded the president.

"Because Mr. Grefwilde directed me to let them alone. He said the quietest way was the best, and told me to let the cowboys have their way as long as they did no actual damage."

The treasurer had turned, and was looking angrily at Loring.

"I wonder that you have the audacity to drag me into this matter, sir," he said, severely. "You have no right to do it. It was your business to preserve order and protect your passengers."

"Didn't I follow your orders?"

"You did not. I suggested tact in dealing with them, but you did willfully wrong in allowing them to capture the train."

"Well, by George, I did exactly as you told me, and if there is blame afoot, I place it where it belongs—on your shoulders," warmly replied Loring.

"That will do," said King, harshly. "Disrespect to your superiors is the crowning evil of your wrong-headed course. This, coupled with the numerous complaints which have been made

against you, decidedly settles the matter. You are discharged, sir."

Loring laughed unconcernedly.

"All right, your royal nibs. I don't hanker to punch tickets on a road run by you, anyhow; but you must bear in mind that I own one share in the S. F. & V. Consequently, I'll have a vote on every important question. Good-day, William H. Vanderbilt, and may you live till you die. So-long!"

Loring paused to give one more glance at Grefwilde, whose treachery seemed most contemptible, and then walked out, not in the least troubled by his discharge.

"An ill-mannered knave," observed Grefwilde, frowning.

"You are right, sir, and the road gains through his loss. Such language as he used to you is not to be tolerated."

"I don't mind the language, for men in my business hear a good deal like it; but I wasn't running his train, and I don't propose to bear blame for his want of 'sand,'"

King agreed that this was quite right, and then the magnate fell into deep thought. Should he, or should he not, at once leave Straight Flush? He had made arrangements for accepting more stockholders in the road, and their contributions would swell the fund, but every hour was one of danger.

"Mr. King," said Grefwilde, "here is another letter from Iron & Steel, requesting payment for sums due them."

"They are confoundedly impatient. Write them that their claim shall be paid Thursday."

"Very well."

"And, by the way, we will change the combination of the safe. It is now locked on 'Elfin,' isn't it?"

"Elfin is the word, sir."

"I will change it to 'Magic.' Don't forget it."

The president made the change, and then left the house. He wanted to be alone, so that he could think freely, and he thought a walk would do him good. He had no objective point in view, but his feet took an old route, and it was a genuine surprise—so great a one that he recoiled violently—when he found himself beside Aaron's grave.

"Fiends alive! why did I come here?" he muttered. "Is there a magnetizing power about the place which draws me? Curse it, why should I travel where I invite danger at every step? I will come no more; I swear it. Ha!"

His gaze became fixed on a point with a wild stare. And no wonder. On the end of Aaron's grave sat a head of Cupid—the head which was like a nightmare to him, unless its appearance was deceptive.

The miserable man glared around him like a madman. Were hostile eyes watching him?

No one was in sight, and a sense of relief suddenly came to him. His enemy had made a mistake in leaving the head there. He would destroy it, and so remove one bit of evidence.

He strode forward and lifted it. Then he knew he had been deceived. The head was a fragment of rock, and not that of the old Cupid. At a distance the likeness was perfect; closely seen, it vanished, though, considering the material, the head had been well-shaped and painted to a bronze hue.

King cast it against a boulder and it fell in a score of pieces.

No point of evidence had been destroyed, but, at least, he had conclusive evidence that one person, at least, knew the minutest particulars of his crime.

"I will get out of Straight Flush at once. I must go quickly, secretly and alone. Miriam can join me sometime, but, for the present, I must hide from the sight of man, where the image of Cupid was never heard of or known. I'll go, taking the funds of the S. F. & V., and woe to them who stand in my path!"

Loring left the house and walked through the village without any depression of spirits. He had taken position on the new road against his own wishes, and he was not sorry his term had so suddenly ended.

His object now was to leave a letter at the secret post-office for Braceridge, informing him of the change, and then visit Rose.

He had barely passed the village, however, when he was accosted by the Horned Dragon, who abruptly appeared from behind a rock.

"Ha! my good man, how does it happen you're not on your train?" the masked man asked.

"Well, most mysterious magician, if you want a straight tip, I don't mind telling you that I have dissolved copartnership with the S. F. & V. In other words, King has fired me."

"Discharged, eh? Well, you're no great loser. King is about frozen out of Straight Flush."

"I know nothing about your freeze-out, nor about you, either, for that matter. Why the dickens do you go perambulating around here with your face tied up as though you had a howling tooth? I'm not sure but you're King, himself."

"Well, I'm not; rest easy on that. By the way, what do you know about Dane Templeton?"

"Templeton?"

"Yes."

"Nothing in particular."

"I don't refer to Cain Magruder. I mean the bona fide Dane Templeton, once of Georgia."

"Cain says he is the Georgia Templeton."

"You and I know he lies."

"We do, eh?"

"Yes."

"Speak for yourself."

"I am now speaking, not for you, but of you. What do you know of the genuine Templeton?"

"Nothing," said Loring, curtly.

"I thought perhaps you did, since you were born and reared in the same town."

"The blazes I was!"

"So I said. Come, my man, no more evasion. You can give me points on Templeton if you will. Who is he? Where is he? Why has he forsaken his kindred? Why did he think necessary, after he was flung overboard from the Mississippi steamer by Brown, to forsake his own name? Of course I know that the corpse in the river helped him along to a decision, for it deceived Brown and he knew it would, but was it wise for him to play the game he did?"

"Hold up!" cried Loring. "Give me time to breathe; you will swamp me. Who the dickens are you who is so interested in the case?"

"A friend of Templeton. A man who wonders why Templeton, seeing that Brown and Cain Magruder are one, will allow the man to go unpunished."

"Don't ask me. I suppose Templeton—if there is a second Templeton—can manage his own affairs. Speaking of Cain Magruder, there he is now."

He pointed, and the Horned Dragon, too, saw Cain striding toward the village. He was unshaven and dusty, and seemed to have just completed a long journey.

"I want to speak of him and of the real Templeton," continued the Horned Dragon. "Will you follow me to a more retired place?"

Loring hesitated and looked keenly at his companion. What was behind that mask? The interest he had always felt in the man increased during the late conversation, and his decision was soon made.

"Lead the way," he said. "I follow where you go."

Leaving them to complete their journey and their conversation, let us now follow Cain Magruder. He had, indeed, just returned from a long journey. Anxious to verify or disprove the strange story told by Grefwilde, he had journeyed far and searched carefully. As a result, he returned convinced that he was, indeed, the son of Barb and Meg Brennan.

Cain walked rapidly through the village, his face toward King's, and it grew suddenly brighter as he saw Miriam outside the house. He was not seen in return until his footstep caused her to look up.

The expression which then flashed over her face was not one of pleasure, but he was not in a mood to read critically.

"Do not go, Miriam," he said. "I am preparing to leave this vicinity forever, and, before I go, I have something of importance to say to you. Will you hear me through?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SECRET COMBINATION.

MAGRUDER'S reappearance was anything but pleasant to Miriam, but, being so close to the house, and knowing that Peter Grefwilde was there, she did not feel alarmed.

"I feel sure that you will say nothing which will interest me, but I suppose I can listen."

"Isn't that rather ungracious?"

"Perhaps so."

"So you do not regret it? Well, let it be so. Perhaps it is as well. Miriam, I am about to leave Straight Flush forever. I have been the victim of circumstances, and there are blots on my name which are galling to a sensitive mind. I am about to return to my Georgia home. Years of wandering have convinced me that there are no people like one's own, and no friends like old friends. Glad indeed shall I be to get back where there is no one base enough to accuse me wrongfully. But, Miriam, must I go alone? Must the dream I have cherished for a year past fade forever away? Miriam, I love you in spite of all that has occurred. Will you go with me as my wife?"

That he was in earnest she could not doubt, and the curt refusal which would have met a less romantic avowal refused to leave her lips. She seriously answered:

"I am sorry you still cherish thoughts of what is forever past. I have neither the time nor the inclination to trace our past intimacy, so let me answer as briefly as I can. The regard I once felt for you has gone, and as I would not link my future with that of a man for whom I cared nothing, I cannot consider your proposal. Take my best wishes and go. I can say no more."

"This is a severe blow, Miriam."

"You will forget it. Undying affection is, I fear, a myth."

"Suppose I should become gloomy over this refusal, and take to reckless ways?"

"If recollection of your old home and old friends is as vivid as you have pictured it, you will not—you cannot. Man's great safeguard is

the memory of his childhood. If his childhood was a correct one, he will never go far astray." Cain bit his lips in vexation. He had intended to talk of the charms which suicide and dissipation had for the blighted heart, but she had spiked his guns at the very beginning.

He felt that his suit was a vain one, and as he saw Cortlandt King approaching he resolved to end the interview. He gave his hand to Miriam, who took it somewhat reluctantly, and then strode away.

"So ends that affair. There is one more move to make. If such a thing be possible, I will make Meg Brennan forsake that brute she calls husband. I am not sure but I will avow my relationship if I cannot move her otherwise. If she will go with me I will actually try to reform!"

Miriam expected some comment from her father concerning Magruder, as he came up, but none was made. The magnate's face looked pale and troubled, and she was impressed by the fact that he was aging rapidly.

He spoke before she could greet him, asking her to go into the house, and his voice had a tremor not usual to it. She followed with a presentiment of trouble hovering over her.

Half an hour later King entered the office, where Grefwilde was still writing.

"Mr. Grefwilde," said the president, "I have decided to go over in person and settle the claims of Iron & Steel, Slow & Wright, and our other creditors; in fact to pay off every debt owed by the S. F. & V. The stockholders suppose these bills to be already settled, and they shall no longer be kept in the dark."

"Perhaps it is the better way," replied the treasurer, like a machine. "I was just writing a letter to Iron & Steel, but I will destroy it if you say so."

"Do so, if you please."

"I have also been running over the financial condition of the S. F. & V.," continued Grefwilde, "and I find that sixty-eight per cent. of the total sum paid in by the stockholders will settle all debt so far incurred."

"Just so, Mr. Grefwilde."

"The road is thus left with an excellent working capital," said the treasurer, leaning back in his chair and looking calmly at the president through his blue goggles.

"Beyond a doubt. Have you the financial statement in form?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please make four copies, for our various debtors, which I will take with me."

Mr. King spoke very blandly, for he wanted to direct the treasurer's attention elsewhere while he ransacked the safe. He did not intend to be content with sixty-eight per cent. of its contents, but to take every dollar and bid adieu as soon as possible, and forever, to Straight Flush and the Gunnison. He felt the need of hastening to where Cupid's head was unknown.

Grefwilde turned to the desk, and Mr. King dropped on his knees and set out to open the safe. He turned the letters of the combination until he had spelled "Magic," the word on which he had lately locked it, and then essayed to open the ponderous door.

It did not swing back so readily as usual.

He bent lower to make sure he had the right letters, and shook the door and pulled hard. But it did not open. He turned to Mr. Grefwilde, who was calmly working.

"There seems to be something wrong with the lock."

"It was all right this morning," replied the treasurer, steadily writing.

"You saw me set the new key?"

"Yes, sir."

"And it was locked on 'Magic'?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I can't see why it don't open."

"Perhaps you are not using the right kind of 'magic,'" quietly observed the treasurer, as he turned off a handsome "W" with his steady pen.

"Jesting won't open the door," said King, giving it a spiteful jerk, "I don't understand this in the least. It never bothered before. Perhaps you can open it, Mr. Grefwilde."

The treasurer turned around, thrust his pen behind his ear, folded his hands and looked calmly at his superior.

"If I were to try, I should not use the word 'Magic.' Since you were here before I have made a change in the key, and it now requires a different word."

King frowned suspiciously.

"Why did you make a change, sir?"

"To prevent you running away with the funds of the Straight Flush & Valley road."

"What?" cried the startled president.

The previous statement was steadily repeated. Grefwilde was not at all excited, nor did he speak severely. Nothing could surpass his calm indifference.

"Do you mean to say that I was going to run away with the company's money?" angrily demanded King.

"That is just what I do mean to say. Matters have been working up to this point for some time. To-day, you intended to take every dollar the safe contains and disappear forever from the sight of your deluded victims here. It was

to foil this move that I changed the key of the combination. The safe is now locked on a simple word, but what it is I, only, know."

The baffled president faced his subordinate with a furious light in his eyes.

"You have betrayed me!" he hissed.

"I have protected the men you intended to defraud. You had me elected treasurer because you thought me a pliant knave whom you could mold to your will. You were mistaken. From the first I saw your game, and I resolved to foil you. I have done so. The S. F. & V. will not lose a dollar. As for your course toward Iron & Steel, Slow & Wright and the other firms who have furnished material, I have blocked you there. Every bill is paid in full, and the letters purporting to be from them demanding money were all written by parties outside their offices at my request. I have carried on a regular correspondence, but it has been all a blind. All the road's debts are paid."

"But the full sum of money is in the desk," said King.

"Sixty-eight per cent. of it is bogus money. I put it there to deceive you and carry on my plan."

King wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Grefwilde, remember how I have raised you up from obscurity to a good position. Remember—"

A rap sounded at the door, and King quickly bade the applicant enter. Miriam appeared. She then stopped short, for one look at the faces before her was enough to show that trouble was afoot.

"Miriam," cried the magnate, quickly, "Grefwilde has deserted and turned against me. He has changed the combination of the safe and refuses to allow to me to take the money. Speak to him; implore him to have mercy!"

Miriam turned her gaze upon the treasurer. It was singular how gentle and womanly she had grown since the old days at Belplain. There was only sadness and reproach in her gaze.

"I feel sure that if Mr. Grefwilde fully understands the situation he will not refuse your request."

"Miss King, do you fully understand the situation?" promptly asked that gentleman.

"I have told her all," said King, hastily.

"Pardon me, but, to verify your statement, I must request that you repeat it here in detail. When I am sure all three of us clearly comprehend, I will consider your request."

King almost groaned. He had told Miriam that detectives were in Straight Flush to arrest him on false charges concerning the Belplain affair, and that he wished to take his share from the safe and leave town. He had told her no more. His desperate hope that he could work the game in the dark was foiled by Grefwilde's demand for a full explanation.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ROCK ON THE TRACK.

THERE was momentary silence in the room, but King was stirred to a point of desperation and he resolved to have the safe opened, if he accomplished his object at the revolver's muzzle.

"By the fiends!" he cried, "I will bear this no longer. I am president of the railroad, and this safe is my private property. You will refuse to open it at your peril. Give me the key at once, or I will not be responsible for what occurs!"

"More may occur than you expect," Grefwilde quickly answered. "First of all, it is possible you do not know to whom you are talking. You see blonde hair on my head; it was black before I bleached it. My face is pale; it was full-colored before I powdered and pasted it. As for these blue goggles, perhaps I can see as well without them."

The historian still kept his seat and was perfectly calm. He removed the goggles, and a pair of keen, dark eyes were visible. His voice, too, had changed. He drew himself erect, and seemed a new man.

Cortlandt King had discerning eyes, and as he saw the metamorphosed man, even the blonde hair, pale face and ministerial garments could not hide the truth from him.

He recoiled in dismay.

"Braceridge!"

He fairly gasped the word, and then stood speechless.

As for Miriam, she looked in utter amazement. At times there had been inflections in Peter Grefwilde's voice which had seemed familiar, but she had not suspected the truth. He had played his part with the skill of a natural actor.

"Probably you now see the meaning of my revolt," said the detective, quietly. "In my professional capacity I have watched your career step by step. I should long ago have arrested you, but it was my way to let you spring the trap yourself. As for the safe, I do not think you will now try to open it, so I will inform you that it is locked on the word 'Cupid'!"

CUPID!

It was the final blow needed to crush the

guilty president. Even in his dazed, wretched condition he felt sure it was by no coincidence that the fatal word had been used. Cupid! It rung in his ears like an explosion. He felt sure Braceridge knew of his crime. Cupid! Accursed name, and thrice accursed the day when first the thing entered his house. His head swam, and—was it fancy, or was there visible, poised in mid-air, a blood-red head of the god that had proved his demon?

A calm analyzer of his fancy would have known that his reason trembled on its throne, but he believed he saw the thing and was correspondingly affected.

He turned and reeled blindly toward the door.

"Father! father!" cried Miriam, starting after him.

"Keep back! Let me alone!" he cried, hoarsely, and, tearing the key of the door from its place he passed through and locked it on the other side.

Braceridge kept his seat.

"Pixton will attend to him," he quietly thought.

Miriam dropped into a chair and burst into tears. She did not understand all that had occurred, but she knew enough to make her unutterably wretched. Her father's utter collapse was proof enough to her who knew him so well that some dark deed lay at his door. No ordinary thing could bend the Westcourt pride. Desolate and miserable she felt, and she dreaded worse than had yet occurred.

Braceridge arose, his calm face strangely agitated, and went to her side. He laid one hand softly on her arm.

"I am sorry that I have been compelled to cause this scene," he said, his voice as gentle as a woman's.

There was no answer.

"You must think me your evilgenius. I stepped between you and happiness at Belplain, and now—now— You must hate me!"

The bowed head was lifted.

"I am dazed and wretched now," she said, "but even in this state, I remember that you once told me, at Belplain, that I would live to see the day when I would acknowledge that it was the course of an honorable detective to do his duty regardless of all else. Your words have been in my mind ever since, and in the calmness of meditation I have acknowledged their truth. This, at least, I will say. But—but what terrible thing now menaces me?"

The detective did not answer at once. He looked at her with mingled pity and embarrassment. He had never forgotten his fancy for her, and it had deepened and expanded since the same roof had sheltered them. How was he to explain? An explanation meant a revelation of her father's crimes. What could he say to her?

Brinsley Westcourt—we will call him King no longer—went forth from the house with no thought save that of escape. He believed that Braceridge was committing a fatal blunder by not following him, and he intended to make the most of it. He had considerable money on his person, and he resolved to flee and hide himself in some remote corner of the earth.

A train on the S. F. & V. was to start in a few minutes, and he resolved to be a passenger. A passenger? Perhaps he would be the only one. As soon as he reached the station he would order a start. The more people who were left, the better.

He strode toward the depot and soon reached it. The train was ready for the start, but as he was half an hour ahead of time no passengers were aboard. Then he astonished the conductor by ordering immediate departure, an order so strange and unexpected that the knight of the tickets stood speechless; but he was speedily aroused and stirred as the president burst into a fierce storm of abuse.

That settled it, and he was speedily at his post.

"It's a mighty queer order, but Cortlandt King is president of this road, and if he says run up Pike's Peak, up she goes!"

The president did not say so, but as the train rattled away from the station he ordered all the steam that the boilers would bear, and the outfit was soon thundering along over the rails. Four cars were attached to the locomotive, but only one seat was occupied, and the astonished brakemen looked in at the windows secretly at the pale-faced man who sat bolt upright and ever gazed straight ahead.

He had reason to be pale, for the old fancy had come to him that a blood-red Cupid's head was suspended in the air before him, and his brain seemed on fire.

Once, when the conductor ventured to approach, he sent him away in a hurry by thundering:

"On! on! Give her more steam—we are crawling. Heat the whole engine red-hot, if necessary, but let her fly. On! on!"

And the train rattled forward at a pace which made the cars rock like so many cradles and brought strange thrills to the scalps of the brakemen.

"Eighty miles an hour, as sure as shootin'!" declared one of them, and it would have been hard to convince him he exaggerated.

There was one participant in this wild ride of

whom the others, if they knew he rode, made no mention. Sitting calmly upon the cow-catcher was a peculiar figure—a man dressed all in black, with a cloak over his shoulders and a mask which made him look like a negro.

It was the Horned Dragon, who had undergone no change, except that his slouch hat had been discarded and that his mask was an article which covered his whole head, front, back and top, with no perceptible break except two openings for his eyes. From the top arose two black horns of some sort, by which it seemed he intended to make good his title, but he looked more like a picture of the prince of darkness than anything else.

The speed of the train did not trouble him in the least. He sat upon the cow-catcher as nonchalantly as though it had been a parlor chair, and never turned his head as they thundered along.

Hoop-la Cut was a point where the road ran through between banks at a gradual curve, but the way was narrow and bushy and it was impossible to see far ahead. On this day there was much about the track which would not have pleased a railroad man. Between the rails lay a huge stone; one large enough to defy and wreck the stoutest locomotive ever constructed.

Back in the bushes were men who crouched low and watched and listened; a dozen bearded, bronzed fellows who looked as though they should by right be in prison.

And among them, in all his glory, was Barb Brennan. The disguise he had worn as a cowboy had entirely disappeared, and he was once more the black-haired, swarthy fellow with the ill-fitting clothes and the red handkerchief about his neck. This handkerchief he now gnawed, in the old dog-fashion, as he slouched like a fat toad in the bushes.

"Hi!" he suddenly cried, "there's a hum along the rails; train is comin'. Brace up, my bally braves, an' we'll show ther durned leather-heads that the kings o' ther Overland still live!"

The meaning of the rock on the track was plain.

Still thundered the train over the rails; still crouched the nonchalant Horned Dragon on the cow-catcher. It was hastening toward the cut where lay the rock. If it struck, there would be a wreck which would take much money from the pocket of the S. F. & V.

The engineer was at his place and scanning the track with an anxiety he had never before felt. At the speed they were going they needed a clear rail.

They approach the cut, and then he sees something which stirs his blood. A man leaps from the bushes and waves a red flag excitedly. The engineer moves like a flash. He calls for brakes, and then reverses his engine. All is promptly done, but the speed at which they are going makes it impossible to stop quickly. The momentum of the train drives it ahead around the curve—on toward the rock and the wreck.

But the Horned Dragon kept his place as before.

Even when he saw the rock he did not stir, and there really seemed little reason why he should; the speed of the train was checked, and it was clear it would not reach the rock.

But there was another danger at hand.

Barb Brennan and his men were not asleep.

The train stopped within three feet of the rock, and then the wreckers sprung from ambush.

They had been foiled in their first attempt, but Barb was stung to fury; he resolved to attack the train, let the result be what it might. The rough band sprung forward with wild yells, but above all else arose a loud, clear voice, which shouted:

"Halt! Hands up, Barb Brennan, or you are a dead man! Surrender, in the name of the law!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE WILD LOCOMOTIVE—CONCLUSION.

A RATTLING, irregular discharge of revolvers; fierce shouts and yells; hand-to-hand grapples and a cheer of victory—and then half of the train-wreckers lay *hors de combat* and the remainder were prisoners; among them Barb Brennan, who, wounded and ferocious, stood among his captors like a savage tiger, scowling and wrenching at his bonds.

A small, keen-eyed man led the other party, and he was addressed as "Deane." He and his followers were detectives. They had laid a counter-ambush for the wreckers, and, signaling the train in time to prevent an accident, had taken in Barb and his followers in fine style.

Another prisoner than they was there. Judge Westcourt had alighted, furious at the delay, but had promptly been arrested by a man who laconically gave the name "Pixton, detective; the genuine article." All these prisoners were grouped together.

The Horned Dragon was an active person. He seemed known to Deane's party, and it was at his suggestion that Westcourt and Brennan were bound and placed in the cab of the engine while the wounded were attended to. He, too, volunteered to guard them.

In caring for the injured the Dragon was temporarily forgotten, and no one saw him detach the locomotive from the rest of the train and then creep secretly into the cab.

Their first warning came when one of them chanced to look up and saw the locomotive receding around the curve. He uttered a cry, and then all knew that there was a runaway. Deane and two other men dashed in pursuit, but the locomotive snorted as though in derision. The crafty Dragon had given her all possible steam, and as she felt the full effects she swept away at a pace which defied pursuit.

Pixton turned to the Horned Dragon.

"This is your work," he said, angrily.

The masked man laughed loudly.

"So it is. Do you wonder at it? I have sent those two men to sure death. When the train approaches the Devil's Cliff it will be going at such a pace that it'll jump the curve and go over into the chasm. Won't that be a fine revenge? Why did I do it? Did not Brennan murder my brother, Detective Buckley, on the Overland, and is not King a murderer, too? I sent them both to their reward!"

They had gone to—what? The engine was bounding along the track, and Barb struggled furiously with his bonds.

"We must shut off steam, or we are lost. Burst your bonds, old man, or ther jig is up!"

"I see it!" muttered Westcourt.

"See what?"

"Cupid's head!"

"Cupid's head?"

"Yes. Don't you see it floating in the air? It is blood-red, and it follows me—follows, follows! Accursed thing, get back to Aaron's grave!"

"Mad!" muttered Brennan; "mad ez a March hare. Ye gods, how ther blasted engine flies. I must git ter ther throttle or we're gone up forever."

But he could not get to the throttle. The crafty Dragon had thought of that, and ropes held the two men helpless.

On flew the engine—on, on! Hill, tree and rock were passed like a flash; it almost seemed as though fire must stream from the rails. It was a terrific pace.

Barb was alarmed at last. He knew the dangers of the road and his blood seemed to chill. Unless steam became exhausted, or some lucky chance interfered, they were doomed.

"We're 'most ter Devil's Cliff, Brin!" he cried, wrenching again at his bonds.

"I see it still—Cupid's head. It follows, follows, follows!"

The engine struck a curve, on one side of which lay the yawning chasm. Always before it had been greatly slowed at the point; now it took it at a terrific speed.

What happened was inevitable.

Like a captive tiger seeking liberty, the locomotive left the rail; it bounced for a moment on ties and rocks; and then, turning over, went plunging into the abyss with its human freight.

"A word with you, Cain Magruder."

"Great heavens! Braceridge!"

"Yes, it is I, but you need not be alarmed. I still live, despite the fact that I was supposed to die at Hickhack Gap—a trick of mine. But you need not fear me. Your case has been weighed, and if you will swear to get to new scenes, disappearing forever from the sight of those who know you here, you shall go freely."

The two men stood near the outskirts of the village, where Braceridge had come upon and stopped the other man.

Cain was looking at him suspiciously.

"You have parted with your mustache since the old days. I suspect—"

"That I was Peter Grefwilde? You are quite right, but Peter is a thing of the past. Yes, Magruder, it was I who told you that you were Meg Brennan's son."

"How did you find it out?"

"By investigating. During the last year I have had a strong force of men under me, and we have learned a good deal. We not only learned that you were not the real Dane Templeton—you threw him overboard from the steamer, you remember—but we can produce the real Dane. He is now known as John Loring."

"Fiends alive!" cried Cain; "why didn't I recognize him before?"

"Because you only saw him before for a few hours on the steamer, and that in the night-time. John is rather an odd fellow in some ways; when you assumed his identity, he coolly abandoned it. He had a miff against his family, which accounts for his folly."

"I suppose I shall be prosecuted now?"

"I told you before that you should go free, if you agreed to the conditions. By the way, how long since you last masqueraded as the Horned Dragon?"

"So you know of that, too."

"I know more about it than you. As the Horned Dragon, you have had a double; a man who ingratiated himself with your father and asked leave to help you work your racket, which was to bleed Westcourt. Who was your ally, and what was his racket? You don't know, for

he fooled you finely. I'll tell you. His name is Buckley, and he formerly lived in Georgia and knew the real Dane Templeton. He came West to investigate you, which was why he wormed his way into your good graces. He soon discovered that you were not the real Templeton, and that John Loring was the genuine article."

"And I never suspected the crafty devil's game! But why was he so hot against Brennan? I know he killed some of Barb's men, though he tried to keep it from me."

"Do you remember that Brennan once shot a detective named Buckley, on the Overland, at the time Barb jumped from the Express train? The two Buckleys were brothers; hence, Horned Dragon Buckley's grudge against Barb. Your partner in the Dragon business rather outdid you. You wanted to bleed Westcourt and, out of revenge, freeze him out of Straight Flush, but it was Buckley who played trumps and took tricks."

"I should say so. He is a demon."

"Not quite; he has done some good. Of course you don't know that Westcourt tried to murder Aaron Thomas. He decoyed the old man yonder, struck him down with an image of Cupid, and hastily buried him. The Horned Dragon witnessed the affair and, as soon as possible, resurrected Aaron. Westcourt had had no spade, so he was obliged to cover his victim with brush, stones and such dirt as he could scoop up. The brush saved Aaron's life. A little air penetrated to the shallow grave, so he did not smother."

"Then he was still alive?"

"Yes. Westcourt wounded him badly, but the Dragon carried him to his cave and cared for him nobly. Aaron will recover. When he does I shall place in his hands what I have been to great trouble to get—full proof that his sister, Rose Thomas's mother, was legally married to Westcourt. That'll comfort old Aaron considerably."

"Are you a wizard, or how do you get all these points?"

"By watching, searching, laboring, surmising and investigating. But, what of yourself? Do you accept my offer?"

"I do. I'll leave here at once, and none of you shall ever see me again. But what of Westcourt?"

"Dead. He and Barb Brennan went over a cliff together. They fell two hundred feet, and of course, it was the last of both. But does Meg know you are her son?"

"No, and I shall never tell her. She's better off without me. I will leave her free, as Barb has done. May her future prove happier than her past."

"Amen!" said Braceridge, fervently.

We pass over a year. What changes have come to our characters?

Cain Magruder has gone from the sight of those who knew him of old. Whether he is living as honest man or knave, they have no idea.

John Loring has resumed his real name and returned, much to the joy of his parents, to the old Georgia home. There is a Mrs. Dane Templeton, too, and the ex-conductor calls her Rose. With her mother's name cleared, she has given up all revengeful schemes and is as gentle as it was always her actual nature to be.

Aaron has recovered from the murderous blows dealt him, and, in the old Kansas home, is placidly living his later life.

The brother of Buckley, the detective, felt his vengeance complete when he had sent Brennan to his fate, and the Horned Dragon was seen no more. Buckley was arrested, tried and acquitted, and then became a real detective and has done some good work.

He keeps a memento of each case in which he engages, and among them is a head of Cupid, which, he explains, represents the first case he ever worked up.

Meg Brennan, widowed and desolate, tried to disappear from the view of all who knew her, but she could not evade Braceridge's notice. Without revealing himself, he contrived to do much to lighten her burdens, and to help her earn a living. She has earned an honest one, and, under another name, is respected by all. She grieved sincerely for her wretched husband, but time has blunted her sorrow and she is mildly content.

Last, but far from least, Braceridge and Miriam are man and wife. It was long before he dared ask for her hand, for he feared she would never forgive him for her father's fate, but when he did ask he was not refused. She made but one condition; that he abandon his risky calling. This he did, and they began a quiet, happy life.

The Straight Flush & Valley road still exists and prospers. After the resignation of treasurer Peter Grefwilde, new officers were elected. Under their management all goes well.

The West experienced a deep sense of relief when it was known that Black Barb Brennan was really dead. Other desperadoes occasionally worry honest people, but with the removal of the swarthy chief disappeared forever the most dreaded of the Overland train-wreckers.

THE END.

B E A D L E ' S D I M E L I B R A R Y.

191 **The Terrible Tonkaway;** or, Old Rocky and His Pards. By Buckskin Sam.
192 **The Lightning Sport.** By W. R. Eyster.
193 **The Man in Red;** or, The Ghost of the Old Guard. By Capt. Frederick Whittaker.
194 **Don Sombroero,** the California Road Gent. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
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